

Kazakiribane

by Shizukana Sakka

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Summary: A tale of a young boy with a mysterious past, and of a rare Haibane whose birth could signify dramatic changes to the lives of the residents of Glie.

1. The Dawn of Changes

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This Fanfiction is a story concept that I'd had in my head for quite awhile now. There's quite a lot of it that I'm still tweaking here and there for continuity issues before the story can be completely finished, but I'll post it in segments as I finish editing them. Read on... and feel free to leave a review if you are so inclined.

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>Kazakiribane é¢"â^†ã,Šç¾½ â€" **Chapter One: The Dawn of Changes
> By Shizukana Sakka

It was yet another unremarkable morning that would undoubtedly herald another unremarkable day. The young boy had been awake for a while now, but he kept his eyes closed while he tried in vain to re-enter the wonderful world he visited in his dreams. Much to his chagrin, his awareness of the miscellaneous sounds throughout the house continued to increase despite his eyes remaining closed. He could clearly hear the other members of the household as they went about their morning routines and got ready to meet the day. After a few minutes, he realized that he wasn't going to be able to fall asleep

again. Even if he did, it was a school day and someone would be sure to come along and wake him up if he overslept. He sighed deeply to himself and opened his eyes to glance around the bedroom he slept in. That was how he'd always seen it: 'the bedroom that he slept in'. Never his room. Although, to be fair, this was probably one of the nicest families he'd been placed with so far.

He was an orphan, or a parentless foster child to use a more politically-correct term. As far back as he could remember, he'd been living with families that were not his own. Sometimes he would be placed with a family for only a few months, and at other times -- like his current placement -- it lasted for a couple of years. With his childhood being uprooted so often, he grew accustomed to the constant probability of being forced to move into another living situation. As a result, he tended to be very quiet and withdrawn. He wasn't exactly anti-social, but he never saw the point of trying to become anything more than a casual acquaintance with anyone since he'd never been around long enough to form deeper friendships. This was especially true for the families he'd stayed with. Now, at the age of 13, he was weary of the pattern that his life seemed to follow. While his days weren't actually unpleasant, they just didn't seem to hold much joy or excitement for him. What little comfort he did find was usually at night in the landscapes of his dreams.

Over the past couple of years, he'd learned a little bit about dreams here and there from the various schools he'd attended. It had come up every so often in classes, and what he'd discovered from listening to others was that his dreams would probably be considered a bit unusual to most people. Most people's dreams tended to be a bit of a variety of things, but in his case, particularly over the last few years, his dreams were always the same. Every time he went to sleep, it was as if he was part of another place and he was a completely different person. By morning, he wasn't able to remember very much, but by the next evening he was back in that strange world again... and he was always that same person. The biggest disappointment he faced each day was waking up in the morning and realizing that other world wasn't real.

A gentle knock on the door disrupted his thoughts.

"Joey... are you awake yet?" called a gentle voice from outside the room. "You don't want to be late for school, you know."

"Umm... yeah, I'm up. I'll be downstairs in a few minutes, Heather" he called back.

Heather, his foster mother, was actually pretty cool. She didn't insist on him calling her 'Mom' when he'd come to live with her family, unlike some of the others in the past had. Although she did try to get him to 'open up' a little more, she was never too pushy or invasive about it. While he knew that she was sometimes a little discouraged by her lack of progress with him, she never showed it. She was usually pleasant and always had a kind smile.

Joey got himself out of bed and made his way into the bathroom to brush his teeth. He wasn't really in any particular hurry to get down to the breakfast table and was content to let most of the time slip by so he could just grab something simple as he headed out the door to school. Occasionally, he did feel a little guilty about this habit of his. He tended to avoid as many opportunities to socialize with

his foster family as he could, because he knew it would just hurt more when he would inevitably be separated from them. Heather's teenage son and daughter, Tom and Lisa, both attended the local high school and were a little less understanding of Joey's 'loner' behavior. They didn't really bother him too much about it, but from time to time they'd openly asked him if he just didn't like any of them for some reason or was he just some kind of a snob. Since the two teens had much busier social lives, the only time Joey really ever saw them for any great length of time was in the mornings before everyone left for school. For Joey, he felt things were just easier if he went about his morning routine after they did and saw as little of them as possible.

After he'd finished up in the bathroom, he took his time getting dressed until he heard Tom and Lisa leave. After he was sure they'd been gone for a few minutes, he rushed down the stairs and apologized to Heather for being so late. She gave him the same small smile that she usually did -- implying that his avoidance tactic really wasn't fooling her -- and handed him his lunch and an extra banana to eat as he hurried out the door.

"Good luck in school today!" she called after him and then sighed to herself as she returned to her own daily routine.

The walk to school was the usual non-event that it was every day. As he drew nearer to the school, he saw a few of his classmates as they walked together in pairs and small groups. They'd long since given up asking him to walk with them, but they never gave him too much grief over it. It had become an unspoken understanding amongst most of the other kids at school that Joey was simply very quiet and usually preferred to be alone. He was usually friendly enough when involved in things that required his participation, but always seemed to return to his quiet state at the earliest possible opportunity.

In class, their teacher was of a mixed opinion concerning Joey. Mr. Gibson was quite a popular teacher with the students, as he seemed to have lots of ways to make learning fun. Despite his good rapport with most of his students, he was never sure what sort of response he would get whenever he called upon Joey. Most of the time the boy seemed really shy and withdrawn. His teaching experience had helped him to develop all sorts of approaches to best help the more timid children, but Joey was a bit of a puzzle. Over time, it had become clear that the boy wasn't shy but that he simply preferred not to be noticed if he could help it. Mr. Gibson knew that Joey was an exceptionally bright student, for he always had the correct answers to every question asked of him -- even if it seemed as though he hadn't been paying attention.

Mr. Gibson had looked into Joey's file and learned that he'd been through several foster families during his lifetime, including the current family he was living with. There was very little clue as to his true origins and it was likely that the boy himself didn't know any more about it than his teacher did.

After the morning bell had rung to signal the official start of the class, Mr. Gibson prepared to show the students his special introduction to the Geography module he wanted to start that week with them. One of the reasons that he was so effective with his

students was that he had all sorts of methods for encouraging genuine interest in his lessons. Since Japan was subject of this module, he smiled to himself as he knew exactly how he could pique the interest of his students. He brought out a portable A/V stand with a monitor and a playback unit and proceeded to show the class a series of short video clips from Japanese Network Television that he'd edited together. There were a couple of brief news clips, a few commercials, some quick scenes from a talk show and finally a few segments from some popular Anime shows. Mr. Gibson knew that the latter of these would really get his students' attention since he was reasonably sure that a lot of them already watched some of these shows regularly - albeit English-dubbed.

As expected, the clips went over quite well with the kids and they were all quite enthusiastic during the discussion that followed. Even the enigmatic Joey had seemed to perk up a bit with the new material, so Mr. Gibson decided to see if he could encourage the boy's interest a little more.

"Joey, what did you think about the clips? Did you find them interesting?" He asked.

Joey didn't answer immediately and for a brief moment Mr. Gibson figured he'd gone back into 'quiet mode' and was prepared to move onto another student when Joey finally answered him.

"I thought the talk show was kind of neat, but some of the words across the bottom of the screen were wrong. It made those parts look a little silly."

A few of the students turned around to look at Joey with puzzled expressions. This would normally have the effect of making Joey shrink back down into his 'unnoticeable' mode, but this time he didn't seem to notice. Mr. Gibson was a bit puzzled himself.

"What do you mean, 'the words were wrong'? Do you mean the translation?" he asked Joey.

"Umm... yeah. It looked kinda weird."

A couple of the other kids in class started to snicker a bit as they thought that Joey was trying to play a joke on the teacher. A few more began to excitedly whisper amongst themselves. As for Mr. Gibson, if it were any other student he might have thought the same thing. But Joey wasn't an ordinary student, and now his own curiosity had been piqued. He turned the monitor back on, turned off the subtitle feature of the playback unit, and then he re-played the same clips to the class. As expected, all of the kids were a bit confused by the spoken Japanese without any subtitles to read, but Joey was the notable exception. While Mr. Gibson was watching Joey carefully during the playback, it became quite clear that the boy wasn't making any of it up. Somehow, it appeared that he had some understanding of spoken Japanese. There hadn't been anything in the boy's records to indicate that he had such a skill, so when and how did he learn it? This was starting to get a little spooky and it would probably be better to look into it a little later. Not wanting to draw too much attention to this quite remarkable discovery, Mr. Gibson asked a few other students some questions about the clips and then moved into the lessons for the morning.

As the morning wore on, Joey had reverted to his usual un-obtrusive form and by lunchtime it seemed that everyone had forgotten the sudden out-of-the-ordinary linguistic skills of their classmate. As the students filed out past him for lunch break, Mr. Gibson called Joey over to him for a moment. When the last of the students had left the room, he pulled out a DVD case and showed it to Joey.

"Have you ever seen this movie before?" He asked.

"No," was the boy's simple reply.

"Do you know what this says?" Mr. Gibson asked as he indicated the writing on the cover.

Joey narrowed his eyes briefly as he scanned the cover and then replied, "Princess Mononoke"

Being that he was a bit of an avid Anime fan himself, Mr. Gibson had his own personal collection of shows and movies from Japan. The one he'd shown to Joey was the Japan-released version of that movie, which had completely different imagery on the front as well as combined kana and kanji titling. Clearly, the boy seemed to have some ability to read Japanese text as well. He found himself wondering not for the first time, who exactly is this boy? He took a deep breath and leaned back into his chair.

"How is it that you can understand Japanese, Joey?" Mr. Gibson asked him gently as he noticed the boy was starting to appear really nervous.

"I... don't know. It just seemed so... familiar to me somehow."

Mr. Gibson found himself at a loss for words and simply gazed at his very surprising student for several moments. Joey fidgeted under his gaze and had begun to wish that he hadn't said anything at all during class that morning. It drew too much attention to him and that made him feel very uncomfortable.

Mr. Gibson shook himself out of his thoughts and decided to downplay the situation a bit to allow his student to feel a little more at ease. He certainly didn't want to scare the boy off or discourage him from participating in class discussions in the future.

"Well, I noticed in your file that you've lived with a few different families in the past. Perhaps when you were really small you'd learned some Japanese at one point and maybe some of it just came back to you."

The boy seemed to look thoughtful for a moment as he considered this and then shrugged lightly. His body language was starting to lose a lot of the tension he'd been displaying so Mr. Gibson decided to dismiss the topic for now. He changed the subject and talked for another couple of minutes about how well Joey was doing in class and then dismissed him for the remainder of the lunch period. After his student had left, his thoughts returned to the puzzle that was Joey. Where had this boy come from?

As the end of the school day approached, Joey was eager to just get

out of there and find some space to himself. Although he was pretty successful at hiding it, he was still feeling a bit unsettled by the events in class earlier that morning. He was sure that his teacher was now overly curious about him now and that was sure to make things a bit uneasy in the near future. When the last bell of the day finally sounded, he surprised a few of his classmates by being the first one out the door when he was often one of the last.

He was in no hurry to get back to his foster family's house -- he was still reluctant to actually call it 'home' -- so he decided to walk to a nearby park to think for a while. While not completely devoid of people, the park was reasonably large so he was able to find a secluded place to rest with little difficulty. He thought back to what Mr. Gibson had spoken with him about earlier. It was a bit surprising to suddenly discover that he knew another language, and Japanese no less. As far as he knew he'd never read or heard any Japanese before that morning, but he had to have learned it from somewhere. Maybe his teacher was right about him picking it up when he was too young to actually remember it. It was really unsettling that he didn't know much more about himself than a stranger would from reading his school files.

Before too long, he started to feel the beginnings of a headache. Probably from the stress of thinking about this too much, he thought to himself. Maybe if he was lucky it would turn into something more, like a decent cold or something similar that would allow him to skip school for a day or two. If nothing else, it was as good an excuse as any to return to his foster family's house and to keep to himself in the room he used. He wouldn't actually be lying when he told Heather that he wasn't feeling well, so maybe she'd encourage Tom and Lisa to give him some space. What he was really looking forward to was having a nice, soothing shower after finishing his homework and then hopefully going to bed early. He was eager to return to that place in his dreams which was the only place he felt truly comfortable in.

As he was leaving the park, he glanced briefly at some of the people he passed. There were a few kids a little younger than him playing together in the park, and a pair of even younger children that were playing on the swings while their mother watched. He sighed wistfully as he wondered who his own mother was and what she was like. Was she still alive? If so, why did she give him up? Did she even think of him at all? He grimaced as he felt tears start to form in his eyes. Despite his best efforts to avoid these depressing lines of thought, he'd gone and done it again. Not only was he on the verge of bursting into tears but his headache was getting worse, too. Turning in early for bed that night was beginning to look really appealing.

He carefully wiped his eyes while he walked and did his best to avoid passing near enough to anyone who might be able to tell he'd been crying. Aside from being embarrassing, it was just more attention that he'd rather do without by that point. He spared a passing glance back at the younger children as he left the park and suddenly stopped dead in his tracks as he saw something VERY strange. He rubbed his eyes and looked again at the children, but the strange sight he saw was still there.

The children were playing normally as they had been before, but now they seemed to have some sort of shimmering glow outlining them. After a minute or so of staring to ensure that his eyes weren't playing tricks on him, he started to look around at some of the other

people in the park. When he looked at their mother, she also had a glow surrounding her, although hers was slightly different in colour and much less intense than her childrens'. He soon discovered that if he looked carefully enough that he could see this strange effect surrounding everyone he saw. He closed his eyes tightly and shook his head to try to clear it.

'Something must be really wrong with me,' he thought to himself.

After a few moments, he carefully opened his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief as he looked around and realized that his eyesight had returned to normal. Whatever that strange effect was, it was gone and with a bit of luck he wouldn't have anything weird like that happen to him again. He noted with a bit of optimism that his headache was starting to come back under control, but he still hoped he'd be lucky enough to use it to avoid school the next day. Although it was still only late afternoon, Joey was more than ready to write the rest of the day off. He recalled with a touch of amusement that he'd assumed this day would be as unremarkable as the rest of them usually were. Well, he'd certainly called that one wrong.

After he'd returned to the house that evening, Joey's headache finally began to subside. There hadn't been any more instances of strange coloured lights around people since that afternoon. He'd guessed that maybe what he'd seen earlier was simply his eyes playing tricks on him as a result of the headache at the time. At least, he HOPED that was all that it was.

Dinner was a pretty ordinary affair at the household. Mr. Jameson -- or Hank as he preferred Joey to call him -- had returned home from work not long after his teenage children had come in. As usual, he was in a pleasant mood and showed genuine interest when he asked everyone -- including Joey -- how his or her day went. Hank always seemed to carry a certain presence about him that made it virtually impossible not to like him. Joey had experienced enough indifference on the part of previous foster families to appreciate how exceptional Hank's attitude towards him was. As such, Joey had a great amount of respect for this man who had welcomed him into his household.

The evening passed pretty much as it usually did after dinner and Joey mostly kept to himself. The other members of the household, while still a little disappointed, respected his desire for some solitude and left him to his own devices. He stayed in the upstairs room he used and did his homework until it was late enough in the evening that he could have his shower and turn in for the night. He really enjoyed sleeping; not so much for the rest but for the anticipated return to that strange world that he knew was waiting for him each night. If he could get away with it, he knew he'd prefer to go to bed right after dinner and sleep until the next morning. Unfortunately, if he spent that much time sleeping he knew it would raise concerns with his foster family and that would probably end up being far more of a hassle than it was worth. After drying off from his shower, he quickly got into bed and fell asleep within moments.

There were brightly coloured trees in every direction. Their vibrant colours implied the autumn season, yet the air felt warm and pleasant. Just by willing it, he found that he was able to move through the woods but he was unsure of exactly how he was traveling. Although he had legs, he wasn't exactly walking... yet he was moving swiftly amongst the trees and foliage. It felt more like... flying? He didn't know where he was headed, but he felt some sort of beckoning that was pulling him forward. He didn't know why, but he could sense it was important. Suddenly, there was a bright flash and then...

He felt warm... and weightless, like he was floating. The light was very subdued, but not completely dark due to a small amount of diffused light filtering in from... somewhere. He could hear muted sounds that seemed to come from all around him. He focused on the faint sounds and realized that they were voices. Voices of at least a couple of people engaged in some conversation nearby... but where was it coming from? A soft tapping noise sounded to one side of him, giving a clear bearing to its direction of origin. As he moved his arms and legs, he felt the dragging sensation as if they were moving through fluid. All at once, he realized that he WAS immersed in fluid! He experienced a brief moment of panic thinking that he'd drown, but then realized that for some odd reason he was still able to breathe. He resumed his movement in the direction of the tapping noise and encountered a soft barrier of some sort. The voices could be heard much clearer here and he could almost make them out. They sounded like girls' voices. Using his fingers, he began to carefully scoop away at the soft barrier, which came away with little effort. Just underneath, he encountered a harder substance and tentatively knocked on it. It seemed pretty durable, but some instinct within him insisted that it was not invulnerable. He started to strike the surface repeatedly, putting a little more force into each blow. He was encouraged when he saw cracks begin to form in the surface. With a great effort, he struck the surface as hard as he could and felt it explode outwards. Suddenly there was a roaring noise from all around him and he felt a strong current that pulled him forward into a bright light...

â€| He slowly opened his eyes, and as they came into focus he saw that he was lying on his stomach in a comfortable bed. He was greeted by a pleasant voice next to him.

"Ah, you're finally awake! How are you feeling?"

He looked over at the owner of the voice and saw a pretty girl who appeared to be in her late teens sitting in a chair next to the bed. She was dressed in a simple but elegant skirt and blouse combination and offered him one of the most dazzling smiles he'd ever seen. So captivated was he by her smile and pleasant demeanor that he'd almost failed to notice a couple of peculiar things about her. Hovering a few inches above her head was a strange glowing ring and he could make out the tips of a pair of wings peeking out from just behind her shoulders.

He sucked in his breath in a surprised gasp.

'She's an angel... I must be dead,' he thought to himself.

She waited patiently as the figure on the bed continued to stare at her incredulously. She was used to this reaction from the New Feathers. She remembered her own experience of her birth into their world and well understood the feelings of disorientation.

He suddenly realized that she was still awaiting a reply from him and felt how dry his throat was as he tried to speak. Much to his surprise, his voice sounded a little strange to his ears.

"I'm... a little tired, I think," he answered in a soft soprano voice. He tried to sit up, but his body felt so heavy that he collapsed back down onto the pillows.

"That's normal for newborns," she said soothingly. "The weakness and fatigue should go away fairly quickly."

Unsure of what else to say to her, he nodded in understanding although he wasn't really sure if he did. She'd said 'newborn'. Did that mean that he wasn't actually dead?

"I'm sure that you have many questions," she continued in that same soothing and gentle voice of hers. "But before I can answer them, I need to ask you about your dream."

For a moment, he wasn't sure what she was referring to since he'd considered the likelihood that he was still dreaming right now. Then he thought back a bit. It was a little hazy, but he recalled that he was going someplace and there were trees. Lots of trees. In that same soft voice that still felt a little strange to him, he described what little he could remember to the girl.

She looked thoughtful for a moment and then turned her attention back to him with another of those dazzling smiles of hers.

"It is our tradition that we choose our names based upon whatever our cocoon dreams were. In my dream, I dreamt that I was falling through the clouds from a great height, but for some reason I wasn't frightened by it. This is why I had been given the name Rakka, which means 'falling'."

Her eyes unfocused for a moment as she thought again about the description of her patient's dream.

"Hmm, lots of trees... kind of like a forest?"

Rakka looked thoughtful for a moment as though she was recalling some distant memory. She then looked back at the figure in the bed and smiled.

"I know! Your name can be... Mori."

He opened his mouth to reply that he already had a name, and it was... what was his name? For some reason he couldn't remember. Come to think of it, he couldn't remember anything about his identity. Not knowing what else to do, he decided to go along with Rakka's suggestion.

"I... guess that's okay," he replied softly.

"That one sounds pretty good," said a new voice from the corner of

the room.

Rakka and her patient both looked back towards the doorway of the room as the owner of the voice stepped in and approached the bed. Like Rakka, she also possessed a pair of wings on her back as well as a glowing ring in stationary orbit a few inches above her head.

"Hi Kana! Welcome back," Rakka greeted her brightly. She turned her attention back to her patient and made proper introductions.

"Wh.. who are you people? What is this place?" he asked, his voice not much more than a whisper as he tried to take in the enormity of his situation.

"We call ourselves the Haibane," Rakka began. "It basically means 'Ash Feathers'. We are all born into this world in the same way that you were. No one really knows where we came from before this, as none of us can remember anything from before we hatched out of our cocoons -- other than bits and pieces of our cocoon dreams, that is."

"A few of us even have trouble remembering that much," said yet another new voice.

Behind Kana, four more of the pseudo-angels entered the room and introduced themselves. The tallest of them was a young blonde woman named Hikari. Next to her was a younger girl with short, black hair named Chou, as well as two twin girls named Umi and Hoshi that were identical to each other except for the fact that one had black hair and the other's was brown. They all appeared to range in age from mid-teens to early-twenties, but he conceded that didn't necessarily have any bearing on their true ages.

Rakka introduced Mori to the group, and they smiled their approval of their newest companion's name.

Rakka reached over to help him sit up and he noticed for the first time that he was dressed in a long, simple gown of some kind. As he sat upright, he felt something fall in front of his eyes and he absently reached up to brush it away. He was pleased that even though his arm still felt weak it was getting easier to move it, although he felt an odd twinge of discomfort from his shoulders when he did.

'Wait a sec,' he thought to himself. 'What was that in my eyes a moment ago?'

He reached back over his shoulder, grimacing slightly as he felt another slightly painful twinge from his back, and pulled a long lock of chestnut-brown hair into view. Suddenly, a strange realization struck him. Long hair, a soft soprano voice and... he carefully patted himself down on his chest and felt what were undeniably the beginnings of a young girl's breast growth.

'I'm a girl!' he thought to himself in shock.

That in itself was a bit of a surprise since he couldn't remember anything about who he was before he'd awakened in that room. He shouldn't even be aware that being a girl was any different from who he had been before, but for some reason he knew that much was definitely different. Along with everything else he'd just

experienced, the shock was nearly overwhelming.

The other Haibane in the room didn't seem to notice the sudden surprised look on his face, or if they did they likely mistook it for amazement. The girl who had introduced herself as Chou approached him with an oddly-shaped pan from which she used a pair of tongs to withdraw a brightly glowing ring. She held it over his head and it made a gentle humming noise for a few moments as it settled into position a few inches above him.

"Feather Mori," she said in a gentle, yet formal tone of voice. "To help guide your future as a fellow Haibane, I present to you this halo. May it always help to guide your way. Welcome to Old Home, sister Feather!"

After hearing the 'sister' reference, it was the one last item to finally overload Mori's grasp of (her) situation. (Her) eyes fluttered slightly and then she collapsed back down onto the bed.

Kana approached the bed and gently prodded Mori's prone form.

"Hmm... I guess she must still be really tired."

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>AN: More to come in the next chapter: "A New Friend"

2. A New Friend

Disclaimer:_"Haibane Renmei"_ and its associated characters & places used within this story are based upon Yoshitoshi ABe's original concept:_"Charcoal Feathers in Old Home"_. They remain the undisputed property of the owners that hold copyright. I am writing this story for free enjoyment and not for profit, but even so I maintain creative ownership of my own story concepts. None of this story is to be copied or reproduced etc. without my knowledge or permission.

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In some parts of the story, I have tried to use *italics* to help indicate whenever any characters are supposed to be conversing in Japanese. After all, this is supposed to be a story not a language lesson, so I hope that you aren't disappointed if I stick with English for the most part. ;-)

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>Kazakiribane éç"å^†ã,Šç¾½ -** Chapter Two: A New Friend**

> By Shizukana Sakka <p>Joey opened his eyes and looked up at the now-familiar sight of the ceiling over his bed. He tried to force his still sleep-fogged brain to retain as much of the dream as he could

while he was still able to remember any of it. This wasn't the first time he'd had that particular dream; when he'd first appeared in that strange world. He'd had it a couple of times before and knew that eventually he'd have it again. Each time, he'd managed to retain a little more of it as he'd awakened and he hoped that eventually he'd be able to recall all of it with perfect clarity.<p>

For him, the novelty of the repeating dreams had worn off long ago. He knew from what little reading on dream interpretations he'd done that these dreams were a bit uncommon. It was even more odd that they repeated themselves from time to time, sometimes seeming more like memories than dreams. He'd dismissed that notion long ago due to the fantastic nature of his dreams. He knew that there was no way that any of that could have possibly been real, so he just summed it up as the creations of an active but really odd imagination.

He'd considered on more than one occasion that he should try to keep a written journal of what he remembered from his dreams, but he was worried about someone else finding it and reading it. If any of his current foster family ever found out, he was afraid they'd think he was really weird and then he'd probably be moved to yet another foster family. He was a bit surprised that this concerned him as much as it did, but as much as he'd tried to deny it he'd grown to like living with the Jamesons.

He yawned as he sat up and gave his arms a comforting stretch. He was caught short in the middle of his stretch by a small twinge in his shoulder muscles. It was really brief, and not very painful but for some reason it seemed a little familiar. Try as he could, though, he couldn't quite remember why. He cleared his head with a bit of a shake and glanced over at the clock next to his bed. It was earlier than he normally got up for a school day. He briefly considered staying in bed as he usually did but decided against it. It was early enough that he'd probably be able to have first crack at the shower and he wouldn't have to rush, either. After making up his mind, he donned his bathrobe and quickly headed off to the bathroom.

As soon as he'd flicked on the lights, he caught a glimpse of something reflected from the bathroom mirror out of the corner of his eye. It was gone when he'd turned for a proper look, but he was still a little puzzled. For a moment, he could have sworn he saw another of those strange glows from the day before. He stared at his reflection for another minute but saw no trace of the odd phenomenon. He shrugged and started to run the water for the shower. It was probably just my imagination, he thought to himself.

School that day went a little easier than he'd thought it might. Since the class was still going to be studying Japan for the next week or so, he was sure that his teacher would draw more attention to the fact that Joey could understand Japanese. However, despite his teacher's apparent surprise the previous day, Mr. Gibson didn't direct any more attention towards Joey than he usually did. His classmates also seemed to have forgotten about the events of the day before, so the day turned out being about as normal as it could be.

After school that day, being that he typically wasn't in any rush to return to the Jameson's house, he decided to try walking along some streets other than the ones he usually used. Every so often, he liked taking small detours and simply looked at the world around him. Even

though he'd spent a lot of his life relocating between foster homes, he still found that once you got yourself into a routine you stopped noticing what was around you if it happened to be something you saw every day. He preferred to break out of that mindset whenever he could, as he wanted to appreciate all that he saw each day and take none of it for granted.

Most of the houses in their neighborhood were of a pretty decent size for an average family. Not too far away, in the slightly wealthier area of their neighborhood, some of the houses were bigger still -- with a few looking almost like small mansions. Though such houses were a bit older than those of their neighbors, they practically seemed to radiate elegance and beauty. Joey always liked looking at the big, old houses in particular. It was often very quiet and tranquil on the streets with the older houses and he found it to be very relaxing just to walk along them.

On that particular day, he'd been so caught up in his relaxed mood that he'd inadvertently walked much further into that part of the neighborhood than he'd originally intended. By his best estimate, although he wasn't entirely sure since he hadn't really been watching the time, he'd been casually strolling along those streets for close to an hour. Just as he'd reached the point where he decided it'd be best to head back -- after all, Heather would worry if he took too long getting back from school -- he began to hear some emotionally-charged voices nearby.

A little further up the street was a private girl's school that, due to the late hour of the afternoon, seemed nearly empty. Undoubtedly most of its students had eagerly left for the day, but the voices he'd heard coming from that direction suggested at least a few were still around. Normally he wouldn't be so curious, but the tones of the voices he'd heard carried a hint of the emotions behind them. He could sense that something wasn't quite right, and decided to move a bit closer so that he could hear them a little better. As he drew nearer to the wall of the enclosed schoolyard, the voices became clearer as did the apparent situation that was causing them.

"C'mon you freaky little weirdo, come and get it!" said one unseen girl's voice.

"You're wasting your time, Melanie," said another. "She's way too much of a chicken-shit."

"Yeah, Melâ€¦ you might as well just give it back. The stupid foreigner is probably having a hard time understanding you, anyways." Said yet another voice, her apparent boredom evident in her tone.

Joey frowned as he decided he'd heard enough. Normally he minded his own business and never interfered in the affairs of others, but something about this situation was really grating on his nerves. Perhaps it was the notion that girls would bully each other like he'd often seen boys do, or maybe it was because he just didn't like the odds from the sounds of them. Whatever the reason, he knew he wasn't going to simply walk away without trying to help whoever it was that was being singled out by the others. He jumped to grab the top of the wall and pulled himself up on top so he could get a good look into the grounds.

A little further down the wall from him, he saw a trio of girls roughly around his own age that had backed a fourth up against the wall. They were all wearing identical school uniforms and carrying similar book bags, but it appeared that the largest girl was holding an additional one in her outstretched arm and seemed to be trying to goad the fourth girl into taking it back from her. Joey noted with interest that other than being a little smaller in build and height than the other girls, the fourth girl didn't look any different than the others. When he'd heard one of the girls mention 'foreigner', for some reason he'd imagined said girl would have an Asian appearance.

The girl had reddish brown hair that hung down just to the top of her shoulders, a fair complexion and radiant green eyes that he could discern even from over 20 feet away. Those same eyes readily displayed her obvious distress at her situation and were rapidly filling with tears. She looked ordinary enough, Joey thought. What was it about her that these girls found odd enough to pick on her about?

"Onegâ€¦ P..Pleaseâ€¦ My bagâ€¦ give backâ€¦" the girl stuttered in a tiny voice.

Joey widened his eyes in surprise as he heard the girl's slightly broken English. That certainly answered the question as to why the other girls had called her 'foreigner'. For a moment, he felt that there was something kind of familiar about how she was speaking, but he couldn't quite place it.

The largest girl, who Joey assumed to be the one named Melanie, sneered at the smaller girl.

"What's the matter, you little twerp? Is normal-people talk a little too hard for you? I'll give it back if you can manage to ask me properly," she said with a smug look on her face.

"Ah.. g..gomen. I try better," the smaller girl said with a sniffle as she wiped a few tears from her eyes.

'Gomen?' Joey thought to himself as he suddenly realized why the girl's manner of speaking sounded familiar. 'She speaks Japanese!'

He paused for a moment as he considered that it was a bit out of the ordinary for a Caucasian girl of that age to be more fluent in Japanese than English. Of course, he had only just discovered his own mysterious aptitude for the language so he certainly wasn't one to go pointing fingers. Now he was even more eager to try and break up this little bullying session.

"_Excuse me_," he called out in Japanese from his position on the top of the wall. There was a startled gasp from all four girls and they quickly turned around to look up at him.

Joey locked his eyes onto the smaller girl's and asked, "_Are you okay?"_

The smaller girl quickly shook herself out of her initial surprise and answered, "_Y..yes, thanks. This happens sometimes. I'm used to it."_

He decided to take advantage of the other girls' surprise and jumped down from the wall. He casually walked up to them and gave them ample time to get a good look at him.

"So, what's going on here?" he asked the rest of them. He tried not to smirk at their wide-eyed expressions when they'd heard him address them in perfect English.

"Whatâ€¦ I mean, howâ€¦" Melanie began as she slowly recovered from her surprise. "How come you can speak Chinese like Hannah here? You're not even Chinese!"

Joey frowned at the taller girl's display of ignorance and shot her a contemptuous look.

"I wasn't speaking 'Chinese', genius. Neither was your friend over there," he said with a nod towards the smaller girl. "That was Japanese. Are you bothering her just because she doesn't speak English as well as you?"

"That's not the only reason, not that it's any business of yours! Who are you, anyways? What are you doing here? Are you creepy-Hannah's brother or something?" Melanie asked as she recovered more of her composure.

"Maybe. Or maybe I just don't like seeing three people ganging up on one. Why don't the three of you take off? Don't you have anything better to do than pick on someone smaller than you?"

Joey tried to stand a little straighter to add a touch of physical presence to his challenge. It was a bit of a bluff, but he was hoping that they were still caught off guard from his sudden appearance that they'd back down just the same. He didn't really know anything about fighting and even if he did, he knew he wouldn't feel right about mixing it up with a bunch of girls.

Nothing was said by anyone as a silent standoff played out between Joey and Melanie for a few moments. Finally, with an annoyed snort, Melanie threw the extra book bag onto the ground near its owner.

"Whatever. I'm bored with this anyways," she said as she started walking away with her two friends falling into step behind her. "We'll finish our little 'talk' some other time, 'kay Hannah?" she called back over her shoulder.

Joey watched the trio until they passed through a gate further down the wall and then directed his attention back to the remaining girl. He picked up her bag and handed it back to her.

"Are all the girls at your school as stupid as her, or is she just a special case?" he asked, switching back to Japanese.

"Most of the others don't like me very much either, but at least they leave me alone," she replied. She held her book bag with both hands and gave a polite bow. "Thank you very much. It was very nice of you to help me like that."

He returned the bow and then started to walk with her along the wall

towards the gate.

"I'm glad I could help. So, your name is Hana, right? I'm Joey."

Hana smiled a bit as she heard how differently he'd pronounced her name compared to the way everyone at her school typically said it.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Joey. You speak Japanese very well! Where are you from?"

Her smile faded as she watched Joey's expression sadden.

_"I don't really know. I never knew my parents. I live with a foster family not too far from here." he _answered with a bit of a sigh.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." she said with a bit of a worried expression on her face.

"Nah, it's okay. Don't worry about it. Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

Joey smiled inwardly as his new friend chattered away excitedly to him. She was clearly much more comfortable conversing in Japanese so it was understandable that she was so relieved to finally have someone with whom she could have a good discussion. As such, Joey was content to let her do most of the talking. He was still getting over his surprise that he could actually converse in the language as well as understand it and read it. He hadn't even known that he could until he'd first appeared at the top of her school's wall.

Hana's full name was Tanaka, Hanako " but aside her family, most people just called her Hana. It turned out that she lived a short distance from her school, so Joey decided to walk her home in case Melanie and her friends were still nearby. She was new to the area since she and her parents had only just moved in around the start of the school year. She'd explained that she had been born in Japan and raised there until the age of 10, when her father's employer needed him to transfer overseas to North America for a while. She didn't get into too many details about what sort of work her father actually did, but apparently it had required their family to relocate a couple of times since arriving in the United States. Having moved around so much, Hanako was often the 'new girl' whenever she got registered at a local school. It also didn't help matters much that her English wasn't as good as the other kids', who were confused about how an ordinary-looking 'white American girl' like her spoke Japanese better than she could English. This was one of the reasons that she'd decided to use a shorter version of her name at school to help draw a little less attention to how different she was from the other students.

Hanako was only half-Japanese, and while she'd grown up immersed in her father's native culture, she'd inherited most of her physical attributes from her mother. Her mother had originally grown up in America and had moved to Japan to teach English shortly after she'd graduated from college. Before long, she'd met Hanako's father and the rest was, as they say, history.

Joey easily identified with Hanako's unhappiness about having to move around so much. He'd been in the same situation often enough, and he remembered several instances where the other kids at school had been a bit rude towards the new 'stranger'. He couldn't quite understand how that might make her appear 'freaky' or 'creepy' to her schoolmates, though. The language difference at its worst would likely only merit a bit of teasing from some but by her own admission, most of the girls at her school didn't like her for some reason. When he'd tried to ask her about what that girl Melanie and her friends had been going on about, Hanako just shrugged and changed the subject. Joey got the distinct impression that there was something more that she wasn't telling him but was probably not comfortable talking about it, so he decided to drop it.

When they'd arrived at the Tanaka residence, she'd insisted that he come in and meet her mother. Joey was getting a little concerned about how late he was going to be getting back to the Jameson's, but he didn't want to appear rude so he agreed to stay for a brief visit. Mrs. Tanaka had been delighted to meet Joey, and while her Japanese wasn't quite as fluent as her daughter's -- or Joey's either, for that matter -- the three of them conversed pleasantly for a few minutes before she had to excuse herself to return to her preparations in the kitchen. At her insistence, Joey had agreed to stay for dinner and called his foster mother to let her know where he was.

While Hanako went to her room to change out of her school uniform, Joey wandered around their family room and looked at some of the pictures displayed on the walls. His new friend's Japanese upbringing was even more evident in many of their family portraits as she and her mother both wore kimonos in most of them. He noted with interest that there were a few framed sketches on the wall that had apparently been drawn by Mrs. Tanaka. Being that he was only 13, he wasn't much of a judge of artistic talent but he was impressed by Mrs. Tanaka's ability just the same. One frame held a beautiful rendering of rolling hills with some wind-driven turbines in the background. Another depicted a view down an old village street with a tall clock tower just visible in the distance. And another showed...

Hanako had stopped in the kitchen to pick up a small tray of refreshments for herself and her guest when she and her mother both heard a large 'thud' sound in the next room. They both rushed into the family room and saw Joey picking himself up off the floor after apparently tripping backwards over one of the chairs.

"What's wrong, Joey? Did you trip?" asked Mrs. Tanaka in English.

Joey didn't answer her immediately, and seemed to be staring intently at something on the wall. She followed his gaze and saw that he appeared to be focused on a couple of her sketches.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Joey coughed slightly and regained his voice.

"Um... sorry, I was really admiring your drawings, Mrs. Tanaka. I guess I wasn't paying attention to where I put my feet."

He stepped carefully in front of one image in particular, and almost seemed to tremble as he did so.

"M..Mrs. Tanaka? Can you tell me about this one?" he asked in a voice that sounded a little strained.

Hanako's mother stepped forward to get a better look at the one he was pointing to. It was a simple portrait sketch of a young girl seated next to a window and gazing outside at the scenery with a contented smile on her face. She was dressed only in a simple blouse, skirt and sandals, but what made the portrait a bit unusual was the pair of wings protruding from the girl's back, as well as a shiny ring frozen in space over her head.

"Oh, that one. That's Hanako's favorite. It's a character from a bedtime story that my husband used to tell her when she was little. It's called a..."

"Haibane," Joey finished for her.

A short while later, the three of them were seated around the kitchen table drinking tea. Joey listened as Mrs. Tanaka talked about what she could remember of that story her husband used to tell. Although her husband had told her years earlier that the story was merely based on a local Japanese legend from the region in which he'd grown up, she'd never known anyone else who'd ever heard of it. She was pleasantly surprised that their guest seemed to know some Japanese folklore as well as being able to speak the language so well.

She could only recall bits and pieces of the story -- something about some mythical place where humans and these angelic-looking beings called 'Haibane' co-existed together -- but Joey had listened to her every word with rapt attention. He tried to keep a reasonably calm outward appearance, which was in complete contrast to his frayed nerves and rapid heartbeat.

'Those drawings and her storyâ€¦ it's exactly like in my dream,' he thought to himself.

There was a lot more to this than just coincidence; of that he was certain. He was positive that those images were of the place that he'd visited so often in his dreams. He was making slow progress with his efforts to retain some fragments of the dreams when he awoke so a lot of his memories were still pretty hazy. Though after seeing those sketches, and the portrait of the Haibane in particular, he was quite shocked to say the least.

Hanako had been unusually quiet the entire time, and Mrs. Tanaka was reasonably sure it wasn't simply because their conversation had been mostly in English. Although she tried not to be too obvious, Mrs. Tanaka could tell that her daughter was trying to look their guest over in that 'special' way of hers. She resolved to discuss that with her a little later.

Before long, she had to return to the final preparations for dinner that evening, so she sent the two youths out into the family room. As soon as they sat down on the sofa, Hanako regarded her friend curiously.

"_How do you know about the Haibane?_" she asked.

Joey looked uncomfortable for a moment and tried to think of an answer without being too evasive. Although he'd only just met this girl, she was probably the first friend he'd had in awhile and he wasn't about to scare her off by saying something about seeing things in his dreams. He almost laughed at that thought. 'If only it was as simple as that', he thought wryly.

"_Um.. I don't know exactly. I'm not even sure where I'd learned to speak Japanese, so maybe I'd heard that same story back whenever that was."_

Hanako looked thoughtful for a moment and seemed to accept his answer as being logical enough. She looked over her shoulder back towards the kitchen for a moment and then directed her attention back to her guest. She placed her index finger against her lips and beckoned to Joey to quietly follow her. Without a word, he silently rose from the sofa and they both crept down the hallway together.

They'd approached a door, which Hanako took great care to open as quietly as she could. She slipped into the room and then quickly motioned for him to step inside as she shut the door behind him.

Almost immediately, Joey could feel something strange about the room. He started to develop a minor headache, but ignored it as he glanced around the room. It appeared that they were in her father's study. Aside from a desk that was placed off to the side, there were several filing cabinets stacked around the room and a few bookshelves lined up along the walls. Mrs. Tanaka had mentioned earlier that her husband did a lot of research, and his office certainly showed it.

Joey was starting to feel more uncomfortable with each passing moment. There was something in that room that he could feel 'pulling' at him. He'd never felt anything quite like that before and, quite frankly, it frightened the crap out of him. Whatever it was, it was trying to pull him further into the room and the longer he ignored its call, the worse his headache got. He didn't want to freak out his new friend, but he wanted to get out of that room as quickly as possible.

"_I wanted to show you something that I'd found by mistake in my father's things a few months ago_, " Hanako whispered excitedly to him. "_When I saw how you'd reacted to my mother's drawing, I knew right away that you'd find this interesting_..."

Leaving him standing by the door, Hanako went over to her father's desk and picked up the desk lamp. Despite his discomfort, Joey was intrigued as he saw her extract a small key from the base of the lamp. She then set the lamp back down and moved to the larger of the desk drawers where she used the key to unlock it. She beckoned for him to come closer as she began to withdraw what looked like a small sealed box from the drawer. She sat down on the desk chair with the box balanced on her knees and started to fumble with the latch.

The 'pulling' sensation suddenly increased in intensity, as did his headache. He winced painfully and began massaging his temples with his fingers. 'It's that box... it has to be', he thought to himself. Whatever was inside it was doing this to him. Even though he was

frightened, he was terribly curious as well. He just had to see what was in that box. He took a few steps towards Hanako just as she opened the lid of the box and turned it around to show its contents to him.

Nestled inside the box within a carefully shaped mould of velvet was a simple, silvery-looking ring, roughly 5" in diameter. The instant Joey saw it; he felt a searing pain shoot through his entire body. If that hadn't been enough of a cue for him to get the hell out of there, what happened next sent him packing in a BIG hurry. Hanako had just been turning towards him when the ring started to glow. She was so surprised that she'd lost her grip on the box and accidentally dropped it. The impact knocked the glowing ring loose and it fell out onto the floor. From behind her, she could hear Joey making gasping sounds. When she'd looked back at her friend, what she saw almost caused her to fall off her chair.

What she hadn't wanted to admit to her new friend earlier was the real reason that many people thought she was a little 'spooky'. As far back as she could remember she'd been able to see things that most people could not. She was what her father referred to as 'spirit-sensitive' and she'd apparently inherited it from him. Every so often she would see strange colours and lights surrounding people, which her father had explained to her were people's 'auras'. When they'd lived in Japan, her father had sent her a few times a week to a nearby temple where a close friend of his started showing her how to meditate and perform 'fire readings'. At these sessions, he would train her to focus her sight for brief glimpses into the future. More often than not she'd met with little success but her father's friend was very patient and explained that she'd get better with time and lots of practice. He had been correct and as she got older her gift got a little stronger, though she still needed to work on her control.

After they'd moved to the United States, she'd quickly discovered that Americans were usually far less open to that sort of thing than the people of Japan. On a few occasions, the mere mention of such things would be enough to make some of them turn downright hostile. As a result, she'd tried her best to keep that aspect of herself a secret but every so often she'd slip up. Reacting to things before they actually happened was often a pretty good way to get one's self branded as a freak, even if she never did it intentionally. On rare occasions her special sight would reveal some really fantastic things and, as she stared incredulously at her new friend, she decided that this was definitely one of those times.

There was a faint outline of a pair of wings protruding from Joey's back, as well as that of a similar glowing ring floating a few inches over his head. In addition to that, as she continued to stare at Joey with wide-eyed amazement, she could see a translucent overlap of a girl's body that was superimposed over his own. From the girl's long chestnut-brown hair to the gentle feminine curves of her body, it was difficult for Hanako to see where the girl's image stopped and Joey's real appearance began.

Her friend also appeared to be in a great deal of pain and was holding his head with both hands as though he were trying to keep it from exploding. He made a small whimpering noise and then staggered back towards the door. He fumbled with the doorknob for a moment before he'd managed to get the door open, and then practically ran

out of the room. As soon as he'd left, the glow of the ring faded out and it returned to its original silver colour. She blinked her eyes in surprise for a moment and then quickly raced out of the room after her friend.

She caught up to him at the front door as he was hurriedly pulling his shoes on. The strange image of that angelic girl was gone, but he still looked as though he was in some kind of pain.

"_Joey, what is it? Do you... know? About that girl? Who is she?_" Hanako asked him in a nervous tone of voice.

"...Don't know... my head... it hurts... gotta go," he mumbled in English

As soon as he'd finished donning his shoes, he left their house as fast as he could. On the way out, he nearly bowled over a middle-aged Japanese man who had just started up the front steps to the house when Joey charged past him. Mr. Tanaka looked curiously at the departing youth and then back to his daughter who was standing at the front door with an anxious expression on her face. He raised an eyebrow in a silent query, prompting her for some sort of explanation.

Hanako nodded in acknowledgement of his unspoken request and waited for him to finish removing his shoes before she led him down the hall to his study. He frowned in disapproval when he saw that his desk drawer had been opened. 'Time to find a new hiding place for that key', he thought to himself. When he realized that not only had his drawer been opened but also what had been carefully stored away in it had been removed and dropped on the floor, he practically ran to the fallen object and then delicately and reverently replaced it back into its box.

"_Hanako, I'm very disappointed with you. You know that you shouldn't be in here without permission,_" he said as he gently replaced the box in the drawer and locked it. "_What I've locked away in here, I've done so because it's very special and extremely important. It is not some toy to be left lying about on the floor_"

She bowed deeply to her father.

"_I'm very sorry, father. I had not meant for it to end up on the floor. I only wanted to show it to my friend, but as soon as I did I was startled by something I saw and dropped the box by accident._"

His curiosity piqued, Mr. Tanaka's expression lightened a bit as he considered his daughter's special 'sight' and what she might have seen with it.

"_Tell me what happened, then_" He said to her.

* * *

>AN: I hope you like it so far. More to follow in the next chapter:"Unusual Developments"

3. Unusual Developments

Disclaimer:_"Haibane Renmei"_ and its associated characters & places used within this story are based upon Yoshitoshi ABe's original concept:_"Charcoal Feathers in Old Home"_. They remain the undisputed property of the owners that hold copyright. I am writing this story for free enjoyment and not for profit, but even so I maintain creative ownership of my own story concepts. None of this story is to be copied or reproduced etc. without my knowledge or permission.

This Fanfiction is a story concept that I'd had in my head for quite awhile now. There's quite a lot of it that I'm still tweaking here and there for continuity issues before the story can be completely finished, but I'll post it in segments as I finish editing them. Read on... and feel free to leave a review if you are so inclined.

In some parts of the story, I have tried to use *italics* to help indicate whenever any characters are supposed to be conversing in Japanese. After all, this is supposed to be a story not a language lesson, so I hope that you aren't disappointed if I stick with English for the most part. ;-)

* * *

>Kazakiribane éç"å^†ã,Šç¾½ -**Chapter Three: Unusual Developments**

> By Shizukana Sakka <p>Joey had run for blocks in a daze before he'd slowed down enough to get his bearings and catch his breath. His headache had subsided to the point where it was merely uncomfortable, so he was finally able to think a little more clearly. He was more than just a little bit spooked by what had happened at the Tanaka's and rationally tried to make some sense out of it all as he walked back home.<p>

'Home?' he thought to himself.

He found it a little surprising that he'd finally started to think of the Jameson's place as home, but he tossed the thought aside for the time being as he tried to concentrate on more pressing concerns. His mind was full of questions that he wasn't sure he was ready to know the answers to. Why did Hanako's mother have those pictures of his dream-place? What about the sketch of the Haibane? How did he even know that being was called a Haibane? Then, there was the matter of the dreams themselves, or were they even dreams at all?

He grimaced slightly as he felt another wave of pain wash briefly through him like a gentle tide. It was a bit unsettling, but already the fresh air from his brisk walk was making him feel better. He felt a little badly about running out on Hanako so abruptly and hoped that he'd have a chance to meet her again sometime to apologize. He didn't think he'd be able to work up the nerve to return to her house for a while, though. Whatever that thing was that she'd showed him had scared him right down to his socks. Not only did he feel that awful pain when he'd seen it, but it'd even started glowing! With all the odd things that had been happening to him lately, that was something that he was just not ready to deal with.

He'd been so disoriented when he'd fled from their house that he'd barely heard what Hanako had started to say to him. She'd been staring at him as though her eyes were going to pop right out of her

head and then she was asking him somethingâ€¦ about a girl?

He shook his head and tried to clear his mind. He didn't want to risk making his headache worse by thinking too hard about all that stuff, so he'd just focus his attention on getting back home where he could unwind some of his tension. In the distance, he began to make out the familiar sights of his immediate neighborhood and quickened his pace. He smiled to himself as he envisioned a nice, relaxing hot shower awaiting him when he got back.

After hearing his daughter's account of the incident, as well as what his wife had mentioned about the boy's reaction to her drawings, Mr. Tanaka had quickly excused himself from dinner and locked himself in his study. He didn't want to get his hopes up, but he hadn't felt this optimistic for a long time. This was the closest that anyone in his order had come to finding any real clues as to the whereabouts of what they'd spent years searching for.

The oracles had predicted years ago that the Kazakiribane might be found in the 'lands far beyond the eastern ocean'. It was for this very reason that his order had selected him to come to the United States with his family so that he could search for clues there. His wife's familiarity with her native culture had been instrumental in his efforts to fulfill the sacred task given to him by the elders. Over the last couple of years there had been some clues here and there, but nothing so solid as what had happened that day... and it had been his daughter who had uncovered it!

Hanako was the finest daughter any father could hope for. He loved her dearly and was extremely proud of her, but it was at times like these when he didn't think it was possible to feel prouder. Both he and his wife had known that Hanako had inherited her spirit-sense from him, but it had never been clear as to whether or not it would be strong enough for her to follow in her father's footsteps. As far back as anyone could recall there had never been any women admitted to the upper ranks of their order. Maybe when Hanako was older, she could become the first.

He was disappointed that they hadn't gotten a chance to learn anything else about this mysterious boy's identity other than his given name. Hanako had said he'd mentioned living with a foster family in the area, but hadn't mentioned what their family name was. Now that he had an idea of what he was looking for, Mr. Tanaka was confident that he'd be able to track down the boy's whereabouts using the considerable resources of his employer.

According to his daughter's account, the boy had experienced some sort of extreme reaction to being in close proximity to the artifact. The order's elders and oracles had theorized that such a thing might happen, but since these were unique circumstances there was little real information available as to what they should expect. He would need to give an immediate report to the elders and hope that they could advise him of how to proceed. His own spirit-sense was troubling him, though. As elated as he was from this promising turn of events, he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that time was beginning to run out.

Back at the Jameson's house that evening, Heather was a little surprised that Joey had returned so early after calling to say he'd been invited to dinner at a friend's house. He hadn't offered much of an explanation other than to say that he'd suddenly not felt well and wanted to return home to get some rest. Although he'd claimed that he was feeling a lot better from his walk home, he'd looked a little pale as well as trying to poorly conceal the fact that he was suffering from a headache.

It occurred to her that this was probably the first time that she'd ever seen Joey showing any signs of illness. In the few years since he'd come to live with them, to the best of her knowledge he'd never even had so much as a simple cold. While it was true that she wasn't really his mother, his being the youngest member of their household often brought out strong nurturing instincts within her. Since her own children were well into their teen years, she had been a little saddened that they didn't seem to need her as much as they had when they were younger. When Joey had been placed with their family, he'd always been a quiet but well-behaved boy. Her neighbors had commented often on what a perfect child her foster-son appeared to be and had jokingly asked her if there were any more like him available where they'd gotten him.

As it was, their family didn't really know much about Joey's past -- not that there was all that much to tell. They knew that he'd never known his real family and had been in and out of foster homes for longer than he could remember. It was understandable that the boy was very distant and withdrawn much of the time due to his rootless past. Heather's heart had gone out to this boy from the very first day she'd met him and resolved that his living in their home would be a new beginning for him. She felt a strong emotional bond with him and as a result was often able to see through his usual stoic mask of emotions that he wore. She'd never commented on it directly to him, though, and remained optimistic that he'd become comfortable enough in their home that he'd begin to open up a little more.

She'd sent him off for an early shower before dinner and advised her children to give him his space that evening. She'd explained that he might be coming down with something and she didn't want to risk them catching it, but mentally she conceded that wasn't the only reason. She could also tell that there was something bothering him; something that he seemed to be trying very hard not to think about, and she wanted some privacy with him to see if she could get him to talk about it.

She was concerned that he'd shown very little appetite at dinner -- not that he typically ate very much normally. Even the rest of her family could tell that there was definitely something wrong with him, but they'd decided not to say anything about it. No one was surprised when Joey asked if it was alright to turn in early for the evening, and for once Tom and Lisa didn't comment on it.

"C'mon Mori! wake up," said a pair of synchronized voices.

She opened her eyes and saw the two twins, Umi and Hoshi, standing next to her bed.

"Rakka says you should try to eat somethingâ€¦" Umi began.

"â€¦ 'cause you sure won't feel like eating later and you're gonna need your strength," finished Hoshi.

She started to pull herself into a sitting position and felt a sharp pain in her back.

"Owww!" she yelped, to which the twins gave each other knowing glances.

"See? It's started! I told you so!" Hoshi said to her twin.

"Yeah well, wait and see. My guess was for later tonight and I could still win," Umi replied.

"Don't you two have anything better to do than placing bets?" Asked a tired-sounding voice from the doorway. Mori and the twins looked over to see Rakka and Kana entering the room, the latter of which treated the twins to an unpleasant glare.

"Mori probably has no clue what you're talking about and you're probably freaking her out. Nowâ€¦ get back to your chores!" Kana told them irritably as she chased them out of the room.

Rakka took her usual seat next to the bed and offered Mori a drink from a tray she'd brought in with her.

"How are you feeling, Mori?" She asked gently.

"Better, I thinkâ€¦" Mori replied, still a little surprised at the quiet soprano voice that came out. "I don't feel as weak as I did before, but my back hurts a little."

Rakka had her turn around so that she could undo the ties of her gown and inspect her back. There were two discoloured areas of swollen tissue over each of Mori's shoulder blades and she winced as Rakka gently prodded them with her fingertips.

"It appears that the growth is well underway, and quite normal," Rakka said after she'd finished her inspection. "Soon the fever will come, but it only ever lasts for a single day. Everything will be much better tomorrow."

"Whâ€¦ what is it?" Mori asked with a hint of trepidation in her voice. "What's happening to me?"

Rakka gave her a curious look, and then turned in profile to display her wings to Mori. For added emphasis, she gave them a gentle flap and then relaxed them back into their normal position. All at once, Mori's eyes widened in understanding and she reached over with a trembling hand to gently touch one of Rakka's wings.

"Wowâ€¦ they're real," she said in awe.

Rakka nodded.

"Yes, they are. The wings usually appear within a day or two of hatching from the cocoon. The experience can be a bitâ€¦"

Rakka's voice trailed off as she considered how to best explain what was coming to the New Feather. The emergence of the wings was typically the most painful experience that each Haibane faced. She remembered her own experience and how her then-caregiver Reki had downplayed it a bit to avoid frightening her.

"It's unpleasant," she said after finally deciding on a suitable word. "It will undoubtedly sting a bit when the wing tips first break through the skin, but it'll be over pretty quickly."

She turned back to the tray she'd brought in with her and offered it to Mori. On it, there was a plate with a few pieces of bread and some chopped vegetables.

"You're probably not very hungry right now, but please try to eat something just the same. You need to try to keep up your strength so that you can recover faster."

Although she really didn't feel hungry, Mori took Rakka's advice and ate some of the food from the tray. She was more than just a little bit anxious about the impending arrival of her wings and it was causing an unsettling feeling in her stomach.

Many hours later, she was lying on her stomach and gulping in air while Rakka gently applied an ice-pack to the swollen areas on her back. The fever had come just as Rakka had said it would. Mori was covered in a fine sheen of sweat as unfamiliar muscles in her back would occasionally spasm painfully. She was delirious, but whether or not it was from the pain or the fever wasn't clear. She was barely aware of Rakka's gentle voice murmuring soothing words next to her, but through all the haze that was fogging her mind she thought she'd detected a hint of worry in Rakka's voice as well. She gritted her teeth as another powerful spasm shook her and descended further into her delirium.

"Rakka, what's wrong with her?" Hikari asked worriedly. "The wing growth isn't supposed to take this long!"

"Keep your voice down, Hikari!" Kana told her irritably. "What are you trying to do, scare the new girl even more than she already is?"

"Hikari is right," Rakka answered quietly. "What's happening with Mori isn't normal. The swelling is much larger than I'd ever seen it. I've already sent Chou to the temple to notify the Haibane Renmei about Mori's condition. The only thing that we can do for now is wait."

A few hours later, Mori's condition had worsened. The swellings on her back ran from just below her shoulders to nearly all the way down to her waist and she was clearly in incredible pain. The spasms that racked her body had become so powerful that it took the combined efforts of Rakka, Kana and Hikari just to hold her down.

"What are we going to do?" asked Hikari with tears in her eyes. "Mori might be dying! There must be something that we're not doing

right."

"There is nothing else that you can do, and you have already done all that is required," said a deep voice from behind them.

The three older Haibane all turned their heads and were shocked to see the Haibane Renmei Communicator entering the room. He was followed by an entourage of several of the temple attendants, and finally by Chou.

With his face always hidden behind his mask, most people -- both townsfolk and Haibane alike -- were often quite intimidated by him. Despite a lack of discernable body language, however, he always conveyed a deep sense of wisdom and understanding. His arrival, though surprising, was of great relief to the girls who were tending to Mori. After all, who could better tell them what they should do if not him?

He walked gracefully to the bed and examined Mori in silence. He gently touched her back in few places and the girls tightened their grip on her to prevent her from throwing them off. After a couple of minutes, he directed his attention back to Rakka.

"The wings are about to emerge. Give her this to bite down on," he said as he handed Rakka a short length of wood that was wrapped in cloth. He then gestured for Chou to come over and assist in holding Mori down.

Almost immediately, Mori's struggles seemed to intensify. The swellings on her back began to split and blood started to trickle out. Rakka had just managed to get the stick in between Mori's teeth when she'd thrown back her head and shrieked in agony. Everyone stared in amazement as her wings slowly began extracting themselves from their prison of flesh. When they had pulled completely free, they spasmed briefly out to their full extension and splattered drops of blood in all directions before falling back to a more relaxed position. There was a splintering sound as the brace in Mori's mouth was crushed by her jaws and everyone cringed from the sound of the primal scream that tore from her throat. As soon as it was over, Mori's struggles immediately ceased and her entire body went limp -- much to everyone's mutual relief.

After Mori's wings had fully emerged, it had been glaringly obvious why it had taken so long. Her wings were easily 4 times the size of what was normal for a Haibane. Other than that though, despite the residual blood and other fluids that were still clinging to them, they appeared to be the same charcoal-grey colour of those of the other Haibane. Rakka let her breath out in a sigh of relief after she'd realized that she'd been holding it.

'Normal wings, but so large! It's going to take us all night to properly clean them,' she thought idly to herself.

The Communicator stepped forward and leaned closer to Mori so he could listen to her breathing. Though it sounded a little raspy, he seemed satisfied that it was returning to normal. He turned his attention back to Rakka and the other Haibane.

"It will take her a couple of days to recover, but she should be fine after that. At that time, you must all accompany her to the temple as

what I need to discuss with her will concern all of you as well."

As he was leaving with his entourage, Hikari spoke up.

"S..sir?" she asked nervously.

The Communicator paused at the door and silently gazed back at her.

"What's wrong with Mori?" Hikari paused for a quick glance at the large wings protruding from the back of the exhausted figure on the bed. "Why is she soâ€¦ different?"

There was a long, uncomfortable pause before he finally answered.

"There is nothing wrong with her. She is as she is meant to be. She is a Kazakiribane."

The Communicator then turned and departed with his attendants surrounding him. There was a heavy silence in the room after he'd left, with Mori's deep breathing being the only sound for a few minutes. No one seemed to be able to take their eyes off of the sleeping figure on the bed.

Finally, Chou cleared her throat and spoke up. She was the youngest of the 'Older Feathers' group at Old Home and she hated it whenever anyone reminded her of that. As such, she was reluctant to appear naive by asking about something that apparently everyone but her seemed to know about, but her curiosity got the better of her.

"What's a Kazakiribane?" She asked quietly.

"It means, 'Flight Feathers'," Rakka replied.

* * *

>More to come in the next chapter: "Painful Dreams"

4. Painful Dreams

Disclaimer:_"Haibane Renmei"_ and its associated characters & places used within this story are based upon Yoshitoshi ABe's original concept: _"Charcoal Feathers in Old Home"_. They remain the undisputed property of the owners that hold copyright. I am writing this story for free enjoyment and not for profit, but even so I maintain creative ownership of my own story concepts. None of this story is to be copied or reproduced etc. without my knowledge or permission.

This Fanfiction is a story concept that I'd had in my head for quite awhile now. There's quite a lot of it that I'm still tweaking here and there for continuity issues before the story can be completely finished, but I'll post it in segments as I finish editing them. Read on... and feel free to leave a review if you are so inclined.

In some parts of the story, I have tried to use *italics* to help indicate whenever any characters are supposed to be conversing in

Japanese. After all, this is supposed to be a story not a language lesson, so I hope that you aren't disappointed if I stick with English for the most part. ;-)

* * *

>Kazakiribane éç"å^†ã,Šç¾½ -**Chapter Four: Painful Dreams**

> By Shizukana Sakka <p>Heather opened her eyes and looked around her darkened bedroom. She glanced over at the sleeping form of her husband and wondered what had awakened her. Suddenly, she heard a faint noise coming from outside of the bedroom. She listened carefully for a few moments and then heard it again, only a little louder. It sounded like someone wasâ€| whimpering?<p>

She carefully eased herself out of bed so as not to wake her husband and quickly donned her housecoat. Quietly, she slipped out of her room and headed down the hallway towards the sound. It was coming from Joey's room.

She carefully opened the door and peered inside. Through the dim light provided by the bedside clock, she saw Joey fitfully tossing around in his sleep. He was probably having some kind of nightmare, she thought to herself. As she was letting herself into the room, she suddenly froze when she caught some of what he was saying in his sleep.

"â€| Itaiâ€|" Joey mumbled with a distinctive hint of pain in his voice. "Itamiâ€| senakaâ€| itaiâ€|"

She crouched next to the bed and shook him gently to awaken him, but Joey continued tossing around in the bed and his voice got even louder.

"Itai!" He started to shout as Heather desperately tried to awaken him. She shook him a little harder but he still wouldn't wake up. A few moments later, she heard a sound behind her and was dismayed to see her two teenage children standing in the doorway, obviously awakened by Joey's shouts.

"What's wrong, Mom?" Tom asked. "Why is he making all that racket?"

"He's having some kind of nightmare and I'm having trouble waking him up," she answered him worriedly.

Joey's voice continued to repeat those same strange words and started to rise in pitch, sounding almost like a young girl's voice.

"Itami yo! Domari!"

"WHAT did he just say!" Lisa asked incredulously.

"Never mind that right now!" Her mother barked back at her. "He obviously doesn't know what he's saying! Go to the kitchen and get a glass of waterâ€|"

She was interrupted as Joey suddenly stopped his shouting and thrashing about. His eyes fluttered open and he looked up at her, then back at the people in the doorway -- which now included Mr.

Jameson as well. Suddenly, he was wide-awake and had a nervous expression on his face.

"Uh... what's going on? What is everyone doing in here?" he asked nervously.

Everyone exchanged surprised looks with each other for a moment. Heather then turned back to Joey and spoke soothingly to him.

"It's okay, dear. You were just having a nightmare and you were... ah, talking in your sleep." She looked back at everyone else and told them to go back to their rooms as she'd be along in a few moments.

Joey felt a bit worried about the idea that he'd been talking in his sleep and wondered if he should ask if they'd heard anything of what he'd been saying. Already, whatever the dream had been had faded from his mind, other than a residual feeling that he'd been in some kind of pain. Still, with all the strange things that had been happening over the last couple of days, it was probably better not to ask in case he'd said something really odd. He'd heard that people sometimes say all kinds of crazy things in their sleep and not be aware of it, so he'd hoped that whatever it was that he might have said that the Jamesons would simply assume this to be the case and leave it at that.

"Joey, is there something that's been really bothering you lately?" Heather asked him. "I couldn't help notice that you haven't been your usual self these past few days."

As she was speaking, Joey caught his breath as he saw a brief flash of one of those strange glows around her. Damn, I must be getting worse, he thought to himself.

"Uh, no... not really. Maybe I'm just coming down with something."

She nodded and gave him another of her knowing smiles. Obviously whatever it was, he wasn't quite ready to talk about it. She'd respect his wishes for now and hopefully he'd feel better about sharing it with her later. She gave him a quick kiss on the forehead and told him to try to go back to sleep.

After letting herself out of his room and quietly shutting the door behind her, she made her way back to her bedroom where the rest of her family was waiting for her.

"Mom... do you realize that he was speaking in another language?" Lisa said excitedly, while trying to keep her volume low. "At one point, his voice had even changed! Maybe he's possessed by some kind of spirit!"

Tom gave his sister an annoyed look.

'It figures that she'd be the one to think of that as a good thing,' he thought to himself.

Hank Jameson had been the last to arrive and hadn't clearly heard what Joey had been saying, as the boy had stopped just before he'd reached the door. Just the same, he dismissed his daughter's claim of

anything paranormal and figured that the boy was just being incoherent in the throes of his nightmare.

"We don't know for sure exactly what Joey was saying, and I don't think it really matters at this point," Heather answered. She fixed her daughter with a seldom-used stare that seemed to state 'you'd better listen VERY carefully to what I have to say'.

"You are not to say anything to him about this. If he asks, you are only to mention that you'd heard him shouting, but couldn't clearly hear what he was saying. You will not mention anything to him about different languages or spirit possessions or anything else of that sort. I don't want you scaring him with that over-active imagination of yours. Have I made myself perfectly clear, young lady?"

Lisa frowned slightly, but nodded her head in agreement.

After everyone had agreed not to talk about that night's events with Joey, they all returned to their beds to try to salvage what was left of their night's sleep.

"_A boy? Are you certain?_" asked the voice on the phone.

"_Yes, Elder. Though I only glimpsed him briefly myself, my daughter had spent much longer with him. At one point, she was even able to see the Haibane's form through her spirit-sense_" replied Mr. Tanaka.

There was a long pause as the other party on the phone considered this.

"_Elder?_" Mr. Tanaka prompted nervously. "_How do you wish for me to proceed?_"

The voice cleared his throat before replying.

"_Thanks to the information that you have provided, we should be able to locate the foster-family's name and address shortly. You should then make introductions as soon as possible_"

A brief pause.

"_And Takashi?_"

"_Yes, Elder?_"

"_You should take the necessary steps to prepare your daughter in the event that her assistance might be required_" The voice paused again, then added, "â€|_immediately_"

Tanaka Takashi confirmed his instructions and ended the call. Afterwards, he sat at his desk for a little while and thought about the significance of what he had been instructed to do. For his daughter to be called upon to assist them at such a young age was unheard of. The Elders would not have given their consent for it unless they'd truly believed that it might be necessary.

His mission to the United States had been to simply locate and

confirm the identity of the missing Haibane, which was why he had been entrusted with the safe keeping of the artifact. It had been explained by the oracles that the artifact and the Haibane that it had been linked to would eventually be drawn to one another. It wasn't known what was supposed to happen when this finally did occur, but it was assumed that there would be some sort of significant reaction that would ultimately reveal the true identity of the missing Haibane. This was supposed to be confirmed in the presence of the chosen delegates of their order, so that their traditions would be properly upheld.

Thanks to his report, the Elders were already in the process of dispatching the members chosen for this duty, but it would take them nearly two days to arrive. If he was to prepare Hanako to assist them, then there was a real possibility that there might not be enough time to wait for the delegates to arrive.

He turned off the lights to his study and quietly made his way upstairs, trying to make as little noise as possible. It was still several hours until dawn and he didn't want to accidentally wake anyone up. He paused briefly at the door to his daughter's room and carefully opened the door to peek inside. Although dark, there was enough moonlight shining through the window that he could easily make out his daughter's sleeping form in her bed. He smiled as he watched her gentle, even breathing for a few minutes and then quietly closed the door.

He returned to his bedroom and gently got under the covers next to his wife so as not to awaken her. As he drifted off to sleep, he thought of the important role that his daughter could very well be called upon to play in the near future.

'_I hope she takes the news well_', he thought to himself.

The next morning, Joey awoke to the familiar sound of gentle tapping on his bedroom door.

"Joey? Are you up yet?" Heather's voice called from the other side of the door.

"Uh, yeahâ€¦ I'll be out in a minute," he answered back.

As he pulled himself upright into a sitting position, he felt a dull ache shoot through his shoulders and lower back. Almost immediately, his head started throbbing slightly.

'Damn, I really feel like crap this morning,' he thought to himself as he tried to reach behind himself to rub the sore parts of his back. Unfortunately, his arms weren't quite up to the task of reaching such an awkward position. His headache was a minor nuisance at the moment, but he was hopeful that it would disappear with the help of an aspirin and a bit of fresh air when he walked to school.

As he got dressed, he noted a certain amount of stiffness in his back and shoulders.

'I probably slept wrong or something,' he thought.

It probably didn't help that he still felt a bit tired from having his sleep interrupted during the night. A brief memory of waking up in the middle of the night with all of the Jamesons standing in his room flashed through his mind. For all of them to have been awakened, he had to have been a little louder than simply 'talking in his sleep' as Heather had claimed. He felt a bit of embarrassment over the incident and decided to hurry down to join the rest of them at the breakfast table. At the very least, he felt that he should at least apologize for disturbing them all the night before.

Heather and Hank were both pleasantly surprised to see Joey actually arrive early enough for a proper family breakfast with the rest of them. Even Tom appeared to be a bit surprised, but other than giving Joey a few strange looks he said nothing other than a simple 'good morning'. Lisa, on the other hand, was much more animated when Joey sat down at the table.

"Hey! How's it going, Joey? How are you feeling this morning?" she asked him pleasantly, though Joey could tell that there was something odd in the way that she was looking at him.

"Uhhâ€¦ okay I suppose. I'm still feeling a bit tired," he answered. He then directed his attention to everyone at the table. "Um, listenâ€¦ about last night, I'm really sorry that I woke everyone up. That kind of thing doesn't normally happen with me."

"Speaking of that, what does 'Doh-ma...' ..ow!" Lisa started to ask before she was interrupted by a quick kick under the table. She glared over at her brother for a moment and then turned back to her breakfast.

Joey blinked his eyes in confusion for a moment and then shrugged. He winced slightly as the simple motion with his shoulders produced another dull ache down through his back.

Heather took notice of the stiff manner in which Joey was moving his arms and could tell that he was in a bit of discomfort. His complexion also appeared to be a little paler than usual that morning.

"Joey, are you feeling alright this morning?" she asked with concern evident in her voice.

"Well, I've felt better," he admitted in a lighter tone of voice. "It's probably just because I didn't sleep properly last night. I'm sure it's nothing."

Hank spoke up to echo his wife's concerns.

"You're probably right, but maybe you should consider staying home from school today to be on the safe side. Perhaps the extra rest will do you some good."

As appealing as the idea was, Joey didn't really want to stay home that day. He felt badly enough that he'd had some kind of episode in the night that had awakened everyone and if he stayed home, he knew that Heather would spend the whole day fussing over him. He was eager to give the impression that everything was back to business as usual

with him so that they'd forget about what happened the night before as soon as possible.

"Um.. no thank-you, Hank," he replied as politely as he could. "I appreciate the offer but honestly, I'm okay. I'd really prefer to go to school today."

"Well, okay. If that's what you want, just try to take it easy today, alright?" Hank said as he excused himself from the table. He gave his wife a quick kiss and then collected his briefcase before heading for the front door. He paused to wish everyone a good day and then quickly left the house.

Back at the table, there was an odd silence as everyone stared at Joey for a few moments. Joey noted that there was a certain curiosity present in the way that they stared at him that was absent from how Hank had been looking at him. It was making him feel more than just a little uneasy and he started to fidget uncomfortably. Noticing this, Heather quickly snapped herself out of it and turned her attention back to her two children.

"Well, look at the time! You two had best hurry up and finish your breakfast or you'll miss the bus for school. It's too bad that you never seem quite as eager to get to school as Joey does."

Lisa looked as though she wanted to say something else, but was interrupted by a quick glare from her mother. She turned her attention back to her breakfast and grumbled something under her breath.

A few minutes later, after a bit of breakfast small-talk that sounded a bit strained to Joey, the two older teens excused themselves from the table and then headed out to meet their bus. Joey decided to wait a few more minutes before he left for school himself to minimize the chance that he might run into Tom and Lisa on the street before their bus came along. Undoubtedly they would want to talk about whatever had happened the night before out of earshot of their mother and he just didn't feel up to answering any questions at the moment. Besides, since he couldn't remember anything there wasn't much to tell.

When he did leave for school, Heather echoed her husband's advice that he should take things easy that day and then wished him luck. He couldn't help noticing the level of concern evident in her voice and wondered if he should just come right out and ask her why she was so worried. He put the idea aside for the time being and decided to focus on getting through the day first. His back and shoulders were really starting to bother him and he regretted not having asked for some aspirin before he'd left the house.

"Mr. Jameson?" the secretary called politely from the doorway of his office. When he looked up at her from the paperwork spread out on his desk, she continued, "There's a Mr. Tanaka here to see you."

Hank Jameson nodded to his secretary and she ushered the visitor in. The middle-aged Japanese man was dressed in a stylish business suit and carried an attaché case. He smiled as Mr. Jameson rose from his desk to greet him and both men made polite bows to each other.

"Good morning, Mr. Jameson. I am Takashi Tanaka. I apologize for arriving unexpectedly, but I was in the area on business and wanted to stop by to thank you personally," said Mr. Tanaka in only slightly accented English.

Mr. Jameson widened his eyes in mild surprise.

"Thank me?" He said as he gestured for Mr. Tanaka to have a seat. "Have we met before, Tanaka-san?"

Takashi smiled appreciatively at Mr. Jameson's use of the appropriate address.

"No, but yesterday your foster son made quite an impression on my daughter. She was having someâ€¦ 'difficulties'â€¦ with a few of the other students from school when he'd suddenly appeared and came to her assistance."

Takashi paused and gave a deep sigh.

"Unfortunately, my work makes it necessary for my family to move frequently. It's been hardest on my daughter, Hanako, who has difficulties making new acquaintances every time we move someplace new. As she had lived most of her life in Japan before we moved to America, her English isn't quite as good as that of her peers and at times they have been less than kind to her because of it. Fortunately, your foster son had interrupted one such incident yesterday."

Mr. Jameson nodded in understanding.

"Joey is a very well-mannered boy. Although he typically likes to keep to himself, he probably identified with your daughter's situation due to the number of times that he himself has been treated as the 'new stranger' by his peers. Joey has only lived with us for a couple of years, but prior to coming to stay with us he's had a history of numerous other placements."

Takashi nodded as Mr. Jameson spoke. Of course, he'd already known what Joey's placement history was thanks to the thorough research that had been completed and forwarded to him that very morning. Remembering the confused state that the boy had been in when he'd left his house the previous night, Mr. Tanaka hoped the boy wouldn't remember that he hadn't actually mentioned the Jameson's family name. It would look far too suspicious that Mr. Tanaka had been able to locate them so quickly if that ever came up.

"Well, my wife and I are both grateful for the boy's help as well as for the friendship he has shown our daughter. He and Hanako both seemed to take an instant liking to one another."

Takashi paused briefly as he thought of the boy's proficiency with Japanese. It was one of several things about Joey that had intrigued his daughter. Although he had a pretty good idea where it came from, he had a strong suspicion that the boy's foster family was unaware of this aspect of him. He decided it would probably be better not to mention that for the time being.

"One of the reasons that I came by to see you today, Mr. Jameson, was

to invite you and your family to dinner at our home tomorrow evening. My wife and I rarely find the opportunity to entertain guests and would be honored if you could attend. Besides that, our Hanako is eager to see Joey again and we would like to meet with the rest of your family."

"That is very generous of you, Tanaka-san," Mr. Jameson replied earnestly. "But would it be alright to postpone for a couple of days? Joey wasn't feeling very well this morning before school and my wife and I are concerned that he might be coming down with something."

'_Not feeling well?_' Takashi thought to himself. '_It couldn'tâ€| be starting already, could it?_'

"Oh, of course. Mr. Jameson. I'm sorry to hear that," he answered.

He thought quickly for a moment when inspiration struck him.

"Hanako had mentioned that she wasn't feeling very well this morning, either. Perhaps she is coming down with an illness herself and might have accidentally passed it on to your Joey. What sort of symptoms has the boy had?"

"Well, it's hard to say. He's a bit of a stoic so although he wouldn't admit it, it appears that he was experiencing back pains of some sort, as well as headaches. My wife also mentioned that he'd had a slight temperature the night before, and then of course there wasâ€|"

Mr. Jameson's voice trailed off as he thought about Joey calling out loudly in his sleep the night before. He remembered his daughter's silly claims that Joey had been speaking in some other language. Lisa had been going through her various let's-see-how-much-I-can-shock-my-parents phases for a while now, and her latest interest was an intense fascination with the occult. As a result, she tended to have a bit of an overactive imagination. At the time, she had been adamant that Joey was possessed or some such nonsense but he'd dismissed it.

"Was there something else, Mr. Jameson?" Takashi asked politely.

"No, not really," Mr. Jameson said as he quickly broke himself out of his brief reverie. "Joey hadn't slept very well last night and is probably just feeling a little under the weather due to fatigue. It's probably nothing to worry about."

Takashi nodded, then rose from his chair and made a polite bow. Mr. Jameson rose and returned the bow.

"Well, I shouldn't take up any more of your time," Takashi said as he offered Mr. Jameson his business card. "Please give me a call in a few days when you know for certain if your Joey is feeling better and we can arrange for our families to get together for dinner."

"I'd like that, Tanaka-san. I hope that your daughter is feeling well, also."

The two men shook hands and Takashi left, trying not to appear to be in too great a hurry as he headed towards the exit. He had to report this latest development to the Elders, though he already had a strong suspicion of what was happening. If he was right, then there was very little time left in which to prepare Hanako for what was to come.

By early afternoon, Joey was starting to wish that he'd taken Hank up on his offer to stay home from school for the day. Instead of getting a little better as he'd hoped, he'd gotten considerably worse since that morning. His back pain had progressed to the point where he would feel shooting pain in his shoulder blades with even the slightest movement of his arms. If that wasn't bad enough, his headache was worse too and those strange coloured glows had started to reappear around just about every person he looked at. As things stood, he was no longer as concerned about trying to conceal his discomfort as he was about simply making it to the end of the school day. He thought off-handedly about how Heather would undoubtedly go overboard trying to take care of him when she saw how much worse he'd become, but at the moment he was in too much pain to worry about that.

Mr. Gibson had suspected that morning that Joey wasn't feeling quite right, but now it was glaringly obvious that something was wrong with the boy. Although he tried to hide it, it was plainly evident that Joey was in some kind of pain and was having difficulty concentrating. When he'd summoned Joey to approach his desk for a private chat, it almost seemed as though it took everything the boy had simply to rise from his seat. He then staggered slightly as he made his way towards his teacher's desk.

"Joey, you don't look well. How long have you been feeling like this?"

"Ummm jus' since thisss mornin'," he mumbled in reply. "But it wuzzn' this bad then."

"Okay, Joey I want you to come with me. I need to bring you down to the Nurse's office, alright?"

Normally, Joey would balk at such a suggestion but it would be something of an understatement to say that he wasn't quite feeling like his usual self. Whatever happened at the Nurse's office, he hoped that she wouldn't make too big a deal out of the situation. He figured that he was probably just coming down with some kind of illness like the flu or something along those lines. As far as he could remember, he'd never been sick once in his life so maybe now it was finally catching up with him.

Mr. Gibson announced to the rest of the class that he would be back in a few minutes and they were to continue working quietly at their desks until he returned. He then escorted Joey out of the room and noticed that Joey seemed to sway a bit with every step. Whatever was wrong with the boy, he hoped that it wasn't contagious.

When they'd arrived at the Nurse's Office, Mr. Gibson had a brief conversation with the Nurse to explain the symptoms he'd observed in Joey and then politely excused himself to return to his classroom. He

gave Joey a gentle pat on the shoulder as he passed by him, but immediately withdrew it when the boy suddenly gasped out in pain. He and the School Nurse briefly exchanged worried glances, and then he left the office.

Immediately, the Nurse gave Joey a brief examination and checked his temperature.

"Oh dear, you seem to be running a bit warm. You definitely seem to be coming down with something," she told him sympathetically.

She took note of how he had been gingerly moving his arms and shoulders and helped him remove his shirt so she could get a better look at him. The pains he was experiencing in his joints could certainly be attributed to whatever was ailing him, but she still had to rule out the possibility of any physical abuse. She was both surprised and relieved at what she saw when she began to inspect his back. Though there wasn't any bruising evident, she noted that there seemed to be some swelling in the tissues around each of his shoulder blades. It was a little curious, but didn't appear to be too serious. She'd recommend to the boy's family to keep an eye on the situation in case it got any worse, but she expected that all the boy would really require would be a few days of rest.

After the Nurse had contacted the Jameson's residence, Joey was a bit surprised at how quickly Heather had arrived at the school to get him. She'd had a bit of an anxious expression on her face when she'd arrived, but it had softened a bit as she and the School Nurse spoke briefly about him. Joey was to be excused from school for a few days -- or longer, if required -- so that he could recover from whatever he'd come down with. She'd mentioned his temperature as well as the tenderness in his back and recommended that Heather have Joey sleep on his stomach if his discomfort got any worse.

As soon as she'd gotten him home, Heather helped Joey up to the bathroom and explained that she wanted him to take a warm shower and then to lie down and rest in his room afterwards. She made a brief inspection of his back and noted the odd swollen areas that the school's nurse had mentioned. She resolved to make a Doctor's appointment for the following day, regardless of whether the boy was feeling better by then or not.

The shower had the desired effect of relaxing Joey. Although he still seemed to be experiencing some discomfort in his back, at least his complexion was now returning to a more natural colour. She helped him climb into his bed, and although he seemed to fall asleep almost instantly, she'd decided to remain in the room and watch over him for a little while. She hoped that she was only getting herself worked up over something which would turn out to be relatively minor. However, for some reason she couldn't quite put her finger on, she had a feeling that whatever was going on with Joeyâ€¦ this was merely the beginning.

* * *

>More to come in the next chapter: "Wings of Flight"

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* * *

>Kazakiribane é¢"å^†ã,Šç¾½ -**Chapter Five: Wings of Flight**

> By Shizukana Sakka <p>Mori slowly opened her eyes and was a bit puzzled by the large, blurry shape in front of her face. With a bit of effort, she brought her eyes into focus and realized that she was staring at a pillow. As more of her sense of awareness began to filter its way back in, she discovered that she was lying on her stomach | and she could feel a dull ache that permeated throughout her entire body. She felt an odd tugging sensation from a strange area on her back and slowly craned her head around to see what was going on.<p>

The first thing she noticed was what had been causing the 'pulling' she'd felt in her back. Emerging from behind her shoulders was a pair of large wings, and seated just behind her was Rakka | who was gently working a brush through one of them.

"Hey, Rakka! Look | she's finally coming around," Hikari called from a little farther back in the room.

Further behind Rakka, Mori could see Hikari busily tidying up the room. When she'd looked over and noticed Mori gazing at her, she smiled brightly and came over to sit in the chair at her bedside.

Rakka leaned over a bit so that Mori could see her a little more clearly. Mori's large wings were a bit of an obstruction, and their occasional involuntary 'twitch' made it a little difficult to keep eye-contact.

"Good morning, Mori," Rakka said with a gentle smile. It was a smile that spoke volumes about how relieved Rakka felt, as much as the dark circles under her eyes told of how tired she was. "How are you feeling now?"

Mori took a moment to find her voice, which sounded a little raspy to her ears.

"Tired, but betterâ€¦ I think. I feel like I've just run a couple of marathon races. Did I win any of them?" She asked the last with a bit of a chuckle.

Both Rakka and Hikari seemed equally relieved at Mori's amusing little quip. They each exchanged silent looks with one another and nodded in satisfaction.

Mori returned her attention to the wings on her back and looked over her shoulder at them in amazement for a few moments.

"Soâ€¦ that's them, hmm?" She said quietly. She was briefly surprised when they seemed to twitch slightly all by themselves.

As Rakka resumed her gentle brushing of the wings, Mori suddenly realized something significant. She glanced quickly at Hikari's wings, then Rakka'sâ€¦ and then back to her own.

"Hey, wait a secâ€¦ how come they're so large? Are they supposed to be this big?"

"Wellâ€¦ no, not really," Hikari replied. "In fact, before you we'd never even heard of a Haibane with such large wings. The wing-growth is usually hard enough on those of us with 'normal'-sized wings, but I can't even begin to imagine how painful that must have been for you!"

"How much do you remember, Mori?" Rakka asked quietly from her obstructed position behind the large wings.

She thought about it for a few moments.

"Not all that much, I guess I must've been really out of it. I remember the start of the fever yesterdayâ€¦ and how the pain in my back kept getting worseâ€¦ but not much else after that." She paused as the import of what Hikari had said sunk in. "Maybe I'm better off not remembering too much of it."

"That's for sure," muttered Hikari.

Rakka finished up with her brushing and then helped Mori sit up properly on the bed. Due to the large size of Mori's wings, they had her sit with her back near the edge of the bed so that she'd be a little more comfortable.

"Well, the first thing we need to do is get you something proper to wear. That isn't going to be too easy on account of your large wings, but I'm sure that we'll be able to find something." Rakka paused for a moment as she seemed to mentally assess Mori's measurements.

"Next, you definitely have to eat something. I know that this may come as a bit of a surprise to you, but what little you can remember actually happened more than 2 days ago. You've been asleep the entire time while you've been recovering."

Mori took that bit of news with the expected amount of surprise.

"Wowâ€¦ really, that long? I guess the wing experience must've taken a lot out of me."

Rakka nodded her head emphatically.

"Definitely. It took a fair amount out of the rest of us as well. We need to get you up and around as soon as possible, because we're all expected at the temple of the Haibane Renmei later this afternoon."

"What is the Haibane Renmei?" Mori asked curiously.

"It means 'Ash-Feather Federation'," Hikari explained. "All Haibane live under their protection and guidance. They provide for us, and in return we follow their regulationsâ€¦ even when they might seem a little silly or old-fashioned at times."

Rakka frowned briefly at Hikari and shook her head slightly.

"All New Feathers are required to make an appearance at the temple within a few days of their hatching so that they can be officially recognized by the Haibane Renmei. Normally, a New Feather uses those first few days to recover from their wing growth and to get a little better acquainted with their new world. Unfortunately, since your ordeal was soâ€¦ unusual, you've slept through those days."

Rakka paused as she considered the Communicator's unusual request for all of them to accompany Mori to the temple that afternoon. Out of the numerous times that she'd been working at her job at the temple, she had only once come across mention of 'Kazakiribane' in some of the strange text that she was still only beginning to make sense of. According to what she'd been able to understand, a Kazakiribane was rare among the Haibane because they actually possessed the ability to fly. This distinction not only made them rare, but also represented a significant danger to both Haibane and townsfolk alike.

Rakka had a pretty good idea what was troubling the Haibane Renmei about Mori. The township of Glie was completely enclosed within the boundaries of the Great Wall. It was forbidden for any resident of Glie -- human or Haibane -- to ever pass beyond the wall, and those that did never returned. No one really knew why the township and its residents were always so isolated from what lies beyond the Great Wall, but whatever the reason it was an accepted and integral part of their society. Everyone knew that the Touga, who came from beyond the Great Wall to trade with the town, were the only exception to this rule.

What sort of consequences could there be, then, of a Haibane that could travel beyond the Great Wall and back at will?

She glanced at Mori's large wings and easily imagined her being able to achieve flight with them. Although, she conceded, just because she could fly beyond the wall did that mean that she actually would? That was likely to be a large portion of what the Communicator was going to be discussing with them when they all appeared at the temple later that day.

A few minutes later, Chou and the Haibane twins entered the room with several different articles of clothing for Mori to try on. They knew Mori's size quite well since they'd taken all sorts of measurements

while she'd been sleeping. Their only real difficulty had been trying to effectively modify the 'wing slits' to accommodate Mori's unusual wing size. After some experimentation, the girls had settled on a skirt and blouse combination similar to what Rakka wore -- although it had been a combined effort just to get Mori's wings to fit through the appropriate slots in the back.

No one had been very surprised to see that Mori was exceptionally hungry at breakfast, so they took their time to ensure that Mori had enough time to eat everything they put in front of her -- which was quite a lot. After everyone had finished eating, they brought Mori on a tour of the grounds of Old Home. Everyone had gotten a good laugh at her reaction to the Young Feathers, and an even bigger laugh at their reaction to her.

"Wow! You've gotta be the new girl that everyone's been talking about!" said one little girl whose wings twittered excitedly as she spoke. "Your wings are incredibly huge! I'll bet it really hurt when they came, right?"

"Umm, wellâ€¦ I suppose it must have. I remember some pain, but I can't remember the worst of it," Mori admitted. She blushed slightly at all of the attention that she was being given by the small crowd of cherub-sized pseudo-angels. They fluttered all around her like a bunch of pigeons competing for breadcrumbs.

"Can you stretch your wings out for us? I wanna see how big they really are!" asked a little boy with freckles.

"No she can't, dummy!" Said another little boy next to him. "She's still a newborn. She wouldn't know how to do anything like that yet!"

Mori felt a slight tug on her wings as a couple of other Young Feathers started petting them.

"See! I told ya they were real!" One dark-haired boy said to his companion.

Rakka cleared her throat loudly to get the Young Feathers' attention. It had an immediate effect, as did the disapproving look she gave them.

"Okay, that's enough. Mori's wings are still probably a little sore, so why don't you all stop pestering her before you accidentally hurt her?"

"That's okay, Rakka," Mori said with a little hint of a smile. "â€¦ in fact, my wings actually feel pretty good, unlike the rest of me. I guess I'm still a little tired."

Mori hid her mouth briefly with a hand to cover a yawn, then extended her arms over her head and gave them a comforting stretch. She closed her eyes as she tilted her head back and smiled as she felt the warmth of the sun on her face. She felt an odd sensation in the new muscles in her back and then opened her eyes when she heard a series of startled gasps around her.

All of the Haibane were standing around her with wide-eyed expressions on their faces -- even the boisterous Young Feathers, who

for the moment were too stunned to say anything. At first she didn't quite understand why they were all staring at her, but when she happened to notice the shadow she was casting on the ground it became quite clear. While stretching, she'd inadvertently extended her wings out to their full span and it was quite an astounding sight.

She glanced over each of her shoulders to get a better look at them and concentrated on those new muscle groups she'd felt. Almost as if by instinct, she worked the new muscles and her wings responded. She gave an experimental flap with her wings that, due to their substantial size, buffeted a number of the other Haibane with a gentle breeze.

"Whoa! That was so cool!" Several of the Young Feathers chorused together.

Of the Older Feathers, Rakka was the first to find her voice.

"Didâ€¦ did that hurt at all?" she asked carefully. She was surprised that Mori was able display such control over her new wings so quickly, and apparently without any signs of discomfort.

"Um.. no, not at all. It felt really good, to tell you the truth," Mori replied with a thoughtful look on her face. She gave her wings a quick shake and then folded them into their relaxed position on her back. She glanced at them briefly from over her shoulder and then gave a satisfied nod before turning her attention back to the rest of the girls.

The Older Feathers all exchanged glances with one another and then simply shrugged.

'Maybe being asleep for those two days helped her to heal quickly,' Rakka thought to herself.

The tour of the grounds was cut short by Kana's return a short while later. With all of the Older Feathers group now accounted for, it was time for them to keep their appointment at the Haibane Renmei temple. Mori noted with interest how everyone, including her, had a wooden nametag marker at the archway entrance to Old Home. Hikari explained the purpose of the tags -- to mark who was 'home' with the white side of the tag or 'away' with the red side -- and demonstrated their use by flipping Mori's tag over for her.

"This area is also where our community notices are posted," Kana pointed out as they passed the bulletin board that was covered with an assortment of drawings and notes of varying sizes. "This is where you'll usually find any summons notices from the Haibane Renmei. They didn't bother to post one for this group visit to the temple since the Communicator notified everyone in person when he was here the other day."

Kana paused and gave Mori's large wings a quick once-over. She'd been reluctant to examine them in any great detail over the past few days due to her somewhat disturbing memories of witnessing their painful emergence from Mori's back. As it was, thinking about that event still sent a bit of a shiver down her spine. It was undoubtedly more traumatic to the rest of the Haibane since Mori had been so deeply submerged in the fever at the time that she likely wouldn't remember

much of it. Lucky her, Kana thought idly to herself.

"Soâ€¦ um," Kana began awkwardly as their group began their long walk to the temple. "You look a lot better now. How're the uhâ€¦ wings?" she asked as she gestured with her thumb towards Mori's back.

"Well, right now they're probably doing better than the rest of me," Mori answered as she tried to stifle another yawn. "They're fine, but I'm still feeling really stiff and tired. How far is it to this temple, anyways?"

"It's a bit of a long walk from here, I'm afraid," Rakka answered quietly from behind them. "We can stop to rest a couple of times if you need to, but we won't have a lot of time. We can't be late for our appointment at the temple."

"Well, why don't ya just fly insteadâ€¦" said Chou as she glanced back at Mori -- just before Umi and Hoshi pounced on her.

Mori sighed wistfully as she gave her wings a gentle shake.

"Yeah, right," She snorted derisively. "As if I really could. All these are probably good for is amusing the Young Feathers. Haibane don't actually fly, remember?" Her expression softened slightly before she continued, "Stillâ€¦ I'll bet it would be really nice if we could."

Just behind her, Rakka, Kana and Hikari all exchanged worried glances with each other, but said nothing. Other than on their 'Day of Flight', it was true that Haibane did not fly. But a Kazakiribane, on the other handâ€¦

As promised, through the course of their long trek to the temple, the girls took a few brief breaks to allow Mori to rest. The twins spent much of the trip chattering away at Mori to give her a crash-course in all the things she needed to know about living within the township of Glie. Mori found the distraction to be quite pleasant, as it gave her a chance to put aside the apprehension she was experiencing about their imminent meeting with the Haibane Renmei. Although the other girls didn't quite say so, Mori got the impression that there was a little more to this than the required initial visit of a New Feather. While she was certainly grateful for their company, she was a little puzzled as to why all of the Older Feathers were accompanying her on the trip. Surely only one or two at the most would have been necessary to show her the way and make introductions?

When the temple first came into view as they followed the rocky trail along the river, Mori let out a slight gasp of surprise. It was an odd-looking structure, but surprisingly beautiful. In some ways it reminded her of a large, multi-tiered cylindrical birdhouse -- a thought which prompted a slight giggle when she thought of the multiple avian similarities between Haibane and birds. First there was the hatching from their egg-like cocoons, then their wings... and now a large birdhouse. If not for the fact that Haibane weren't able to fly, the temple's appearance almost made sense.

When they had arrived at the waterfall, Mori eyed the simple wooden bridge speculatively as it swayed slightly from side to side.

"Uh... is that actually safe to walk across?" she asked the others

carefully.

Hikari gave a bit of a laugh and immediately ran out onto the bridge where she started to perform a few pirouettes. The other girls groaned slightly and shook their heads at their companion's antics.

"She does this every time," Kana muttered under her breath. "We gotta have a talk with her about it. She keeps freaking out the New Feathers."

Rakka shrugged. "It's not like I haven't tried a few times already. That's just Hikari."

The girls all walked across the bridge and made a point to ignore Hikari's cavorting around as they passed by her. Mori had remained on the opposite side until everyone else had crossed. She took a tentative step out onto the bridge and gulped slightly as she adjusted her balance. Hikari ran back to her and clapped her hands with glee.

"See? It isn't really so bad, is it?" She exclaimed happily. "I always get a big thrill out of crossing this thing!"

Mori found that watching Hikari's jumping around made her feel worse. She took her eyes off of Hikari and glanced over the side of the bridge. It was a fair distance down to the water below. She shivered slightly at the thought of falling from that height. Though it probably wasn't a big enough fall to be life-threatening, it would undoubtedly be very unpleasant. Her attention was suddenly drawn back to Hikari when she heard the older girl let out a surprised gasp.

Hikari had been so caught up in her careless frolicking that she'd accidentally tripped herself. She tumbled towards the side of the bridge and frantically reached out to grab one of the rope barriers to stop her fall. Just behind her, Mori saw what was happening and immediately rushed forward to try to stop Hikari from falling over the side. Unfortunately her added momentum not only interrupted Hikari's attempt to hold on, but it unbalanced both of them and they fell over the side together. The rest of the group watched helplessly from the opposite side as the two girls fell out of sight into the mists below the bridge.

Mori had clenched her eyes shut and held tightly onto Hikari as the two of them fell towards the water below. She held her breath as she anticipated the abrupt end to the unpleasant sensation of weightlessness that awaited them. A few tense moments passed... and then a few more. It slowly began to dawn on her that the fall seemed to be taking longer than she'd expected it would. She carefully opened one eye, and then the other. She could see the river below them but instead of falling towards it; both she and Hikari seemed to be drifting along in the air above it.

'Drifting?' Mori thought to herself. 'Not quite, more like... gliding!'

She quickly glanced over her shoulder and saw that her wings were once again fully extended. Behind her, the view of the waterfall with the wooden bridge they'd just fallen from was rapidly falling back

into the distance. She looked back down at Hikari, who was carefully looking around as though she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing.

"Whoah..." whispered Hikari in awe, giving voice to the very thought that was going through Mori's own mind. Mori, on the other hand, found herself incapable of saying anything at all.

The two girls glided through the air together in silence for a few more moments until Hikari glanced down and noticed that they were gradually getting closer to the water below them.

"Um... Mori, do you think that you can bring us up a bit higher? That water looks really cold..."

Mori shook herself out of her temporary daze and took notice of their slowly declining altitude.

"I'm not sure that I understand how I'm keeping us up like this as it is, but I'll try. Hang on tight, okay?" She replied.

Ever since she'd awakened that morning, Mori had felt a growing awareness of her wings as her body adjusted to their presence. Although they'd felt a little odd at first, she had gradually grown quite comfortable with them as the day wore on. By the time that she and Hikari had fallen off of the bridge together, she'd become so used to them that she'd forgotten they were there. She had been surprised that she'd opened them without even realizing it and now, with her wings fully extended, she was able to feel the very air flow through every one of her feathers. She gave her wings a few experimental flaps and felt the strange new group of muscles asserting themselves as they worked to maintain their flight. Immediately, the two girls began to gain altitude. She began to work her wings faster and reveled in the remarkable ease with which she was able to propel them through the air. They rapidly rose out of the small canyon and soared up into the open sky.

"Wheeee!" Mori squealed with delight as she began to increase their speed. "This is so much fun!"

They flew along for another couple of minutes before Hikari cleared her throat nervously and glanced up at Mori.

"Uh... M..Mori, c..can you bring us back down now? The Haibane Renmei are still waiting for all of us at the temple."

Mori had been so caught up in the exhilaration of the feeling of flight that she hadn't been paying attention to how high she was taking the two of them. She blushed slightly and nodded her head.

"Oops! Sorry Hikari. You're right... the others are probably worried about us," she answered and then sighed softly. It felt so good to fly that she didn't really want to stop, but she knew that it would have to wait. She didn't want to be late for her first official meeting with the Haibane Renmei.

She circled back towards the small canyon and followed the river towards the waterfall. Rapidly, they approached the bank where the rest of the girls were waiting for them. With a few gentle flaps of

her wings to slow their descent, Mori effortlessly touched down in front of the group of stunned Haibane. As soon as Mori had released her, Hikari slid to the ground when her legs seemed to collapse beneath her. They all stared incredulously at Mori in silence with their mouths hanging open as she gently relaxed and folded her wings against her back.

Chou was the one to finally break the silence. With a look of awe and in a voice barely louder than a whisper she said,

"You really are a Kazakiribane..."

* * *

>More to come in the next chapter: "A Special Destiny"

6. A Special Destiny

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>Kazakiribane éç"å^†ã,Šç¾½ -**Chapter Six: A Special Destiny**

> By Shizukana Sakka <p>"Mother, what's going on with Joey?" Lisa asked nervously. "He really doesn't look well... you don't think it's contagious, do you?"<p>

Mrs. Jameson shook her head slightly as she re-applied the damp cloth she'd been using on Joey's forehead. Although he seemed to be sleeping a little easier at the moment, he'd been tossing and turning in his bed off and on for hours. A few times that afternoon he'd even been mumbling incoherently, and she was pretty sure it was that same language he'd been calling out in the night before. She hadn't been able to clearly identify the mystery language yet, but she guessed it was east-Asian. Something was definitely happening to her foster son, and she had a pretty strong feeling that it wasn't any kind of illness.

"I don't think so, dear," she quietly replied. "Whatever it is, I

don't think we need to worry about it affecting us. I am very worried about him, though..."

"Maybe he really is possessed or something like that," Lisa said with a hint of enthusiasm in her voice. "According to some of my research, strange fevers, delusional states and sometimes talking in unfamiliar languages are all symptoms of spiritual possession."

Mrs. Jameson sighed deeply. Her daughter meant well, but this wasn't the sort of thing she really needed to hear at the moment. The girl's fascination with the occult tended to allow her imagination to get the better of her sometimes, but even she herself was beginning to wonder if her daughter might be onto something after all.

She shook herself and brushed the thought aside. There would be time to think about those sorts of things later. She checked Joey's temperature again and noted that it was still gradually rising. Though he didn't awaken, Joey began restlessly moving around under the light sheet she'd covered him with. She'd already decided earlier that afternoon that she'd bring him to the doctor the following day, but if his condition got much worse she was giving serious consideration to bringing him to the hospital that very night.

She ended the minute or so of silence by handing the bowl of water she'd been using to moisten the cloth on Joey's forehead to her daughter.

"Lisa, could you please dump this out and bring back some ice? I want to try using an icepack on his neck and shoulders to see if that will make him a little more comfortable."

As soon as her daughter left the room, Mrs. Jameson pulled back the sheet and gently coaxed Joey to roll onto his stomach. He whimpered slightly in his sleep, but otherwise didn't resist her efforts. As soon as he was resting on his stomach, he seemed to settle down considerably. When Mrs. Jameson got a good look at his back, her mouth fell open in shock. The swollen areas on his shoulders that she'd noticed earlier had grown considerably and were even more discoloured than before. They now looked like a pair of large bruises on his back, as though somebody had beaten him with a very large object. She carefully prodded one of the bruised areas and was a bit startled when Joey suddenly jerked from her gentle touch. It was obviously quite tender so it was no wonder he'd been so restless while lying on his back. She gently checked his back outside of the bruised areas and was dismayed to find that the condition appeared to be spreading. Whatever was wrong with him, she decided that it couldn't wait until the next day for him to see a doctor.

"Holy shit! What the hell is wrong with his back!" her daughter exclaimed from the doorway.

Mrs. Jameson winced slightly at her daughter's use of language, but decided not to comment on it. Under the circumstances, she doubted that her own choice of words would be any better. She quickly motioned for her daughter to bring the bowl of ice to her and she began to wrap some in the cloth she'd been using earlier.

"I don't know what's wrong, but we're taking him to the hospital," she answered in a no-nonsense tone of voice. She gently applied the icepack to the swollen areas on Joey's back and tried to keep tears

from forming in her eyes as the boy flinched with every touch.

"I'm going to call your father and tell him what's happening. I want you to stay here with Joey and keep applying the ice to his back as gently as you can," she said as she demonstrated the task to her daughter.

Mrs. Jameson quickly changed places with her daughter and then hurried to her bedroom to call her husband's office. As soon as she got through to him, she quickly explained what was happening to Joey and asked him to come home immediately so that they could take Joey to the hospital. Just as she was ending the call, her daughter's panicked shout sounded from down the hall.

"Mom! Come here, quick!" Lisa shrieked.

Mrs. Jameson practically tripped over her own feet in her haste to run down the hall as fast as she could. She rushed into Joey's room and found her daughter staring intently at Joey's back.

In response to her mother's un-spoken question, Lisa motioned for her mother to come closer and then pointed to one of the swollen areas on Joey's back. Mrs. Jameson leaned over to have a look at what her daughter was trying to show her and then nearly fell back in surprise. The skin on the boy's back suddenly shifted as though there was something moving just below the surface.

"What do you think that is, Mom?" her daughter whispered.

Mrs. Jameson could only shake her head in silent disbelief. She started to wring her hands nervously and hoped that her husband would get home quickly.

Mr. Tanaka had been on the phone trying to get an update as to when he could expect the special envoy that was en route, when his daughter hurried into his study with a worried expression on her face.

"_Hanako, what's wrong?_" He asked.

"_It's my friend Joey... she... I mean, he's in danger. I can feel it. Father, we have to go help him!_"

Mr. Tanaka raised his eyebrows in surprise by his daughter's brief pronoun slip. That was almost as telling a sign of Hanako's growing spirit sense as the rest of her statement. He nodded to her in acknowledgement and motioned for her to be quiet for a moment as he returned his attention back to the person he was talking to on the phone.

"_It has begun_" he spoke evenly into the receiver.

When Mr. Jameson had arrived at his house, he didn't bother locking the car as he practically ran up to the front door. As soon as he'd entered, his son got up from where he'd been sitting on the living room sofa and came to greet him in the front hallway.

"The kid's gotten worse since this morning, Dad," Tom told him with a touch of apprehension in his voice. "A lot worse. Mom and Lisa are with him upstairs in his room."

He nodded in acknowledgment to his son and then bounded up the stairs. As he was entering Joey's room, he stopped short and gazed in horror at the sight before him. Joey was lying on his stomach and gasping in short breaths as his wife and daughter were both alternating between applying a cold pack to his back and swabbing up blood that was trickling out of two open wounds on his shoulder blades. Something that looked like bone was protruding from each of the wounds and seemed to move every so often all on their own.

"Ite... ite!" Joey rasped out between gasps in a voice that didn't sound at all like his own. A particularly powerful spasm shook his entire body and he let out a long shriek.

"Oh... my... God..." he rasped out as most of the colour drained from his face.

Upon hearing his voice, his wife looked up from her seat on the edge of the bed and then threw herself into his arms.

"Henry... we have to get him to the hospital right away!" She sobbed into his shoulder. "I think he's dying!"

Mr. Jameson could only nod helplessly in response. Even his daughter had tears in her eyes as she tended to Joey. Whatever was going on with the boy, it was clearly beyond anything that they could do for him at home. He gave his wife a kiss on her forehead, then gently broke her embrace and went back downstairs to fetch his son. It would require both of them to safely move Joey to the car in his current condition and he was determined not to aggravate the boy's injuries any further.

He reached the bottom of the stairs where his son was waiting with a bit of a haunted look in his eyes. Now that he'd seen Joey's condition for himself, he understood all too well why his son had preferred to remain downstairs. Just as he was about to tell his son to help him carry Joey, he was interrupted by the front doorbell. Whoever it was, he decided it'd be best to get rid of them quickly so that they could bring Joey out to the car without an audience. When he opened the door, he was taken aback by the two people standing at his front door.

It took him a moment to recognize Mr. Tanaka due to the strange manner in which he was dressed. He was attired in what appeared to be an ornate robe that was marked with strange symbols and was trimmed with small lines of bells in places. Beside him stood a young girl that appeared to be roughly the same age as Joey. She wore a private school's uniform and although her features were mostly Caucasian, he could see some similarities between her and Mr. Tanaka. He immediately surmised that the girl had to be Hanako, Mr. Tanaka's daughter.

Mr. Tanaka and his daughter both bowed together in formal greeting.

"Uh... good evening Mr. Tanaka," Mr. Jameson said politely. "I'm terribly sorry, but this isn't the best time for a visit. We've got a bit of an emergency here and..."

Mr. Tanaka held up his hand to interrupt him.

"Please forgive me, Jameson-san, but that is why we have come. We know that the young boy is at risk. He is very special and it is vital to his survival that we see him immediately."

Mr. Jameson could only stare dumbfounded at the two visitors. Not knowing what else to say or do, he stepped back and beckoned for the two to enter. As soon as he'd closed the door behind them, another loud and very feminine-sounding scream came from upstairs.

Mr. Tanaka exchanged a meaningful look with his daughter and then turned back to Mr. Jameson.

"Unfortunately, there isn't time to explain everything at the moment. Hanako will be able to answer your questions for you when I can not. I must ask you that no matter what happens you do not interfere. Your foster child's survival depends upon it." There were a few moments of silence as Mr. Tanaka waited for Hank's response. Although he was a bit overwhelmed with the implications of what Mr. Tanaka had just told him, he finally nodded his assent and stepped aside. Without another word, Mr. Tanaka donned the hood of his robe and dashed past Mr. Jameson and his son. Hanako quickened her pace and followed her father upstairs. In their wake, Tom and his father could only exchange helpless looks with each other and then turned to follow the two visitors up to Joey's room.

Mr. Tanaka stopped in the doorway and took in the sight before him. He immediately looked back to his daughter and nodded to her, then he knelt on the floor next to Joey's bed with his head bowed.

Although she was a bit startled by the sudden arrival of two strangers in the room, Heather's concern was still primarily focused on Joey. She looked at the strangely attired man and the young girl with him, then past them to her husband who had appeared in the doorway behind them.

"This is Mr. Tanaka and his daughter, Hanako," Hank told her. "They are the people that Joey met the other day. He says that they know what's happening to Joey and that they can help."

"But look at him!" Heather said as she carefully swabbed some more blood from Joey's back. "We don't have time for this! We need to bring him to the hospital right away!"

Hanako, who hadn't said anything up to this point, suddenly cleared her throat to get their attention.

"Gomenâ€¦ Ah, Joey-kun not go to hospital," she said in slightly broken English. "It is dangerous now if him to move, and hospital workers can not help."

It took a couple of moments for what the girl had said to sink in, and then Mr. Jameson asked the obvious question that was on everyone's minds.

"Why not? What is wrong with him?"

"He is not human. She is Haibane," Hanako answered.

As they approached the gate to the temple, Rakka quickly explained the rules about not speaking and to only respond 'yes' or 'no' with the bells of communication that the Haibane Renmei will give them to use during their visit. Almost on cue, the gates opened and several members of the Haibane Renmei came out to offer their silent greeting to the girls and outfitted them all with the bells for their wings and wrists. They were then escorted inside the temple to meet with the Communicator.

As soon as they entered the large garden his voice called out to them, sounding as though it came from every direction.

"I bid welcome to you all, and especially to you, New Feather Mori."

Mori stopped abruptly and nervously looked around for the source of the voice. She was suddenly a little fearful about being the focus of attention. Rakka gently patted her on the shoulder reassuringly and tilted her head towards the path in front of them. Though still a little nervous, Mori got the message and started walking again -- even if she was shaking just a little bit.

The Communicator stepped out into view in front of them and motioned for them all to approach. The group stopped in front of him and the 6 Haibane all offered the traditional two-handed bell greeting, followed by Mori who copied their gesture.

The Communicator chuckled a bit and nodded his head slightly in acknowledgement.

"I see that you are a quick study, New Feather Mori. That is good. There is much that a new Haibane needs to learn about living in the township of Glie, but even more so for a Kazakiribane."

He paused as he glanced at each of the others and then turned back to Mori.

"Already you have learned that you are different from other Haibane. Though we all possess the wings, Haibane do not fly until we each achieve our own Day of Flight. This is true of all the Haibane except for one -- the Kazakiribane. You possess the 'wings of flight' and, as you all have recently discovered, the ability to use them as well."

From the serious tone in the Communicator's voice, Mori was suddenly fearful that she was in some kind of trouble. She opened her mouth to speak and then closed it quickly when she remembered that they were forbidden to use their voices inside the temple. Instead, she cast her glance down towards her feet and started trembling as she awaited the judgment that she knew was coming.

Instead, she felt a hand gently touch her on the shoulder. She looked up and was startled to see that it was none other than the Communicator himself.

"You must have many questions, New Feather Mori. Though it is usually not permitted, I will allow you to speak. Ask your questions," he said with a comforting tone in his voice.

Indeed, Mori had many questions. So many, that she wasn't sure where she should start. After a few moments of gathering her thoughts, she managed to rasp out, "Why am I different? Why am I a Kazakiribane?"

"That is not known. Though you are not the first Kazakiribane, your arrival is the first in many ages. In times long past there have been others like you. While all Haibane must undergo individual trials unique to each of them before achieving their Day of Flight, it was believed that the Kazakiribane were destined to an even greater purpose. You are as you are meant to be, and the exact purpose you are meant to fulfill can only be known through the natural course of time."

The Communicator then directed his attention to the rest of the group.

"The reason that you have all been summoned to appear with the New Feather is so that you can better understand the dangers present not only to the Kazakiribane, but to all residents of Glie."

He paused as he walked over to a nearby rock and sat down on it, and then waved them all over and gestured for them to sit down on ground in front of him.

"As I'm certain you've been told," he said as he directed his attention back to Mori again, "the township of Glie is completely surrounded by the great wall. It is forbidden for anyone, human or Haibane, to leave. Such is the importance of the separation of Glie from what lies beyond, that the exterior of the great wall has been imbued with mystic wards that discourage anyone from touching them. These wards are effective against humans, but even more so against Haibane. Thus, Glie is completely isolated from what lies beyond the great wall, with only two exceptions. They are the Touga and the birds. The Touga are the only ones permitted to enter or leave via the gates, and the birds come and go at will by nature of flying over the wall."

Realization began to dawn on Mori and she brought a trembling hand up to her mouth. The Communicator guessed her thoughts and nodded to her.

"That is correct. You alone have the ability to traverse the barriers of Glie and, as you have already discovered, you could also bring another person along with you if you chose. Should this ever come to pass, you would not only expose yourself to the dangers beyond the boundaries, but should you return you could put all of Glie at risk. The grand purpose for which we are all present in this place -- both human and Haibane alike -- is heavily dependant upon the isolation of Glie. To break that isolation in any way could have catastrophic results."

Rakka nodded to herself as she'd pretty much surmised the same thing. And though he didn't come right out and say it, she knew that the Communicator was also indirectly warning the rest of them not to

encourage Mori to attempt it. Of course, Rakka had long since accepted the necessity of Glie's isolation -- even if she didn't really understand it. As a result, she couldn't even imagine the temptation of trying to see what was beyond the walls. Mind you, that didn't necessarily mean that the rest of the residents of Glie felt the same way. If, for whatever reason, someone felt strongly enough about itâ€¦ would that person possibly try to convince Mori to violate quarantine by flying them beyond the wall?

Mori was well and truly frightened by the implications of what the Communicator had told her. She thought of the exhilaration she'd felt while flying with Hikari earlier and wondered if that feeling might one day overpower her better judgment. If that ever happened, would she find herself flying beyond the great wall? No, that was something she couldn't risk. She liked flying, but there was too high a cost for not only herself but for everyone in Glie if she ever succumbed to the temptation of flying over the wall.

"Iâ€¦ I don't want to put anyone at risk, Sir," Mori whispered as tears gathered in her eyes. "If you wish it, I'll swear never to fly again."

The Communicator paused for a moment as he heard the emotion behind her words and then gently shook his head.

"As noble as your intent may be, I can not allow you to make such a promise. It is in your very nature to fly. Your wings and the instincts of how to use them are proof of this. To deny this is to deny who you are as well as whatever purpose you are meant to fulfill."

He paused and then directed his attention towards the rest of the group.

"Her power of flight is a huge responsibility and burden for her to bear. She is a Kazakiribane, but first and foremost she is a Haibane. It is upon us all to not only assist her with this burden, but also to encourage her to use it wisely."

He rose from his seat and gestured for Mori to rise to her feet. Another member of the Haibane Renmei suddenly appeared seemingly from out of nowhere and stood by the Communicator's side. He handed the Communicator a new set of bells and then gently removed the ones that Mori was wearing on her wings. As soon as he was finished, he gave the gesture of greeting and then disappeared as quickly as he'd arrived. The Communicator turned back towards Mori and motioned for her to hold out her hands, into which he placed the new set of communication bells. He then gently lifted her chin and directed her to look up towards the large, open ceiling of the temple.

"Though not used as such for many ages, it was said that was the habitual entranceway for the Kazakiribane," he said gently. "High above, there is a ledge upon which sits a small chest. This ledge can only be reached with great difficulty by means of ladders and climbing ropesâ€¦ or by a Haibane with the power of flight. These are special bells meant for the wings of a Kazakiribane, and that chest high above us is where you are to keep them."

Mori lowered her gaze back to the Communicator. A shy smile began to form on her face as the meaning behind his words began to sink in.

Sensing her thoughts, the Communicator gave her a subtle nod and then retreated a few paces to give her a little more room.

She unfolded her wings and gave a couple of experimental flaps, then leaped into the air and worked her wings to carry her aloft. She flew to the uppermost reaches of the temple with little effort and then found the ledge that the Communicator had told her about. The small chest was waiting for her just where he'd said it would be. It was adorned with the markings of the Haibane Renmei, as well as a couple of depictions of a Haibane with large wings. She took a quick glance around the ledge and noted that it really would be difficult to reach without flying, although someone had to have done it recently to get that chest up there for her. She placed all of her bells inside the chest and then flew back down to where the others were waiting for her.

She landed easily and saw that the Communicator had returned to his seat on the rock, so she gently folded her wings against her back and sat down with the rest of the Haibane. The Communicator then explained the duties and rules which all the Haibane live by. She wondered only briefly about what sort of job she should look for until the Communicator informed her that she was to work primarily in the service of the temple. Like Rakka, she was to assist with the cleaning of the temple but her domain would be the higher levels of the temple where the others could not easily reach. Aside from her cleaning duties, she was also to serve as a messenger for the Haibane Renmei since her ability to fly allowed her to carry out such tasks with greater speed and ease than anyone else could.

On the subject of the human residents of Glie, the Communicator explained to all of them that it would be prudent if Mori avoided flying in plain sight of the town if she could at all help it. While there wasn't anyone currently living in Glie that could personally remember the last time a Kazakiribane appeared, the human residents also had their own stories and subsequent concerns about such a rare Haibane. It was inevitable that the humans would find out about Mori, but general protocol would discourage anyone from making mention about Mori's supposed ability to fly so long as some effort was made not to flaunt it in front of them. Whenever she needed to visit town, she was encouraged to walk as any other Haibane would unless it was somehow urgent for her to fly.

After everything had been explained to her, Mori was then presented with her own handbook of the Haibane Renmei and thereby officially recognized by them. The Communicator told her that she could have the next few days off before she started working since she had been asleep and missed the usual first orientation days that most New Feathers experience after hatching. All of the Haibane stood and made the two-handed greeting to the Communicator as he dismissed them -- including Mori, even though she was no longer wearing any bells -- and then they all headed back to the main entrance of the temple so that the others could return their bells.

As soon as the group was far enough away from the temple, they all started chattering away excitedly to Mori.

"Wow, this is so cool!" said Umi. "You're actually a Kazakiribane! And you're living with us in Old Home!"

"Yeah, the other Haibane at Abandoned Factory are going to be really

jealous when they find out," Hoshi added.

"What's 'Abandoned Factory'?" Mori asked.

"Well, it's another conclave of Haibane, sort of like Old Home," Hikari explained. "The Haibane that live there were born from cocoons that showed up in that place just as each of us had been at Old Home. These are the only two places in Glie where cocoons are known to appear. For some reason only girls are born at Old Home, but at the Factory it's co-ed."

"Hmmâ€¦ that sounds like that could lead to interesting possibilities. Is that how the Young Feathers are born?" Mori asked shyly.

There was a brief pause of stunned silence and then all of the other Haibane girls suddenly burst out laughing. After they'd managed to recover enough of their composure, Kana carefully explained the situation to Mori.

"The Young Feathers are usually born at the Factory as well, but they hatch from cocoons just as the rest of us do. Besides, the Haibane Renmei have strict rules about the kind of fraternizing that you're thinking of," she said with a bit of a smirk on her face.

"The reason that the Young Feathers usually live at Old Home is because the Haibane at the Factory don't really know all that much about looking after them, so we care for them instead." Rakka added.

"Soâ€¦" Chou finally spoke up in an attempt to get the conversation back on track. "The Communicator didn't say you weren't allowed to fly, right? I meanâ€¦ he even gave you a job that will involve flying."

Mori nodded in response.

"So, uhâ€¦ do you think it would be alright ifâ€¦ uh, wellâ€¦" Chou continued shyly

A small smile started to form on Mori's face as she guessed what Chou was trying to ask her. Chou was the smallest and youngest of the Older Feathers group, and Mori got the impression that she often felt left out of things because of it. Hikari had already gotten a quick trip through the air with her, but Mori decided that she'd do something a little better for Chou.

"â€¦ Um, could I fly with you?" Chou finally managed to ask.

"I dunno if that's such a good idea, Mori," Kana interrupted before Mori could reply. "Remember, the Communicator said not to go around showing off your flying ability unless it was necessary."

Mori's eye twitched a little in annoyance at Kana's statement. She was even more annoyed when she saw the downcast look appear on Chou's face. Without any further ado, she quickly unfolded her wings and scooped Chou up into her arms. She gave a few flaps of her wings to lift them a few feet off the ground and then called back over her shoulder to the rest of the girls.

"The Communicator said I should try not to fly around humans if I could help it. Well, Haibane aren't human, so I guess it's okay then. I'll see you all back at Old Home, 'kay?"

Before any of them could say anything else to her, she flew off easily into the sky with Chou in her arms, who giggled and clapped her hands in pure delight. As the others watched the two of them disappear into the distance, Hikari turned to Kana with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"You know, she does have a point."

* * *

>More to come in the next chapter: "The Past Revealed"

7. The Past Revealed

Disclaimer:_"Haibane Renmei"_ and its associated characters & places used within this story are based upon Yoshitoshi ABe's original concept: _"Charcoal Feathers in Old Home"_. They remain the undisputed property of the owners that hold copyright. I am writing this story for free enjoyment and not for profit, but even so I maintain creative ownership of my own story concepts. None of this story is to be copied or reproduced etc. without my knowledge or permission.

This Fanfiction is a story concept that I'd had in my head for quite awhile now. There's quite a lot of it that I'm still tweaking here and there for continuity issues before the story can be completely finished, but I'll post it in segments as I finish editing them. Read on... and feel free to leave a review if you are so inclined.

In some parts of the story, I have tried to use *italics* to help indicate whenever any characters are supposed to be conversing in Japanese. After all, this is supposed to be a story not a language lesson, so I hope that you aren't disappointed if I stick with English for the most part. ;-)

* * *

>Kazakiribane é¢"å^†ã,Šç¾½ -**Chapter Seven: The Past Revealed**

> By Shizukana Sakka <p>The Jamesons all stared dumbfounded at Hanako as they tried to make sense out of what she'd just told them. While it was evident from how she had been speaking that English was not her primary language, she could speak it well enough that it had sounded as though her statement was no mistake.</p>

"Wh-what do you mean 'not human'?" Tom said with a touch of uneasiness in his voice. "Joey's a Heyâ€| uhâ€| Haiâ€| er, what did you call him?"

"Hai-ba-ne," Hanako answered as she carefully sounded it out for them. "My father search for her many years. She is why our family come to America."

The Jamesons were starting to realize that Hanako's continual use of female pronouns was also deliberate. As though to further drive the

point home, Joey would sporadically cry out in pain from the bed in a very female-sounding voice. Hank cast a quick look at his foster son and then turned his attention back to Mr. Tanaka. Though his face was hidden under the hood of his robes, he appeared to be silently meditating. Hank's throat suddenly felt very dry.

"Tanaka-san, I'm afraid I don't quite understand any of this. You said that you came here to help Joey. What is it that you are proposing?"

Mr. Tanaka made no reply, other than to exchange another glance with his daughter.

"Please excuse," Hanako quickly interjected. "My father means no disrespect, but tradition forbids him to speak in the presence of a Haibane."

As strange as everything happening around them was, Lisa's usual interest in all things paranormal allowed her to keep her thoughts a little more ordered and logical than the rest of her family for the time being. She'd taken a keen interest in the various arcane-like symbols that adorned Mr. Tanaka's robes from the moment he'd first entered the room and pegged him for some kind of Mystic or Shaman. Her eyes widened a bit as he now pulled out what appeared to be a large, flat jewelry box from within his robes. She finally decided to speak up at last.

"What's that?" She asked him, and then looked back at his daughter when she realized that he wouldn't answer her. "Is that something that can help Joey?"

Hanako paused for a moment as she tried to think of the correct words to say.

"Hai" Uh, yes. Joey-kun is changing, but not safely. His human body can not survive it. He must re-join, or he will die."

With that, Mr. Tanaka opened the box and revealed a 5" diameter glowing ring. He carefully, almost reverently, removed it from the box and held it out in front of him. The intensity of the glow began to increase as it got closer to Joey.

Heather drew back in fear from whatever the object was.

"What are you going to do with that!" She asked with a tremor in her voice. Instinctively, she began to reach for Joey; determined to pull him further away from Mr. Tanaka.

"Ah" p..please?" Hanako said in an attempt to reassure her. "This must be. Joey-kun may not have much time. It is only way."

Heather looked up at her husband who gave her a hesitant nod of his head. Although still uncertain of Mr. Tanaka's intent, she carefully took hold of Lisa's arm and encouraged her to step back with her. Mr. Tanaka bowed silently to them in gratitude for their cooperation and then moved to the end of Joey's bed.

Starting at the boy's feet, Mr. Tanaka held the ring a few inches above Joey and then slowly moved it up along his body. As he worked his way towards Joey's head, both the ring and the boy's body began

to emit a silvery glow. The ring began to vibrate and emit a high-pitched humming noise when it was over Joey's head, then it suddenly erupted in an explosion of light that sent Mr. Tanaka stumbling backwards. As soon as they were able to clear the spots out of their eyes, the Jamesons were stunned when they saw that the glowing ring was somehow suspended unaided in the air over Joey's head. Heather took a tentative step towards Joey, but was stopped by Mr. Tanaka's hand on her arm. Wordlessly, he shook his head at her and signaled everyone to step well back from the bed.

For the first couple of minutes, nothing seemed to happen. Joey already appeared to be a little calmer with the presence of that strange ring above his head, so Lisa guessed that it was probably providing some kind of healing magic. From where she stood with the rest of her family against the wall, it appeared as though whatever was protruding from Joey's back was beginning to move around again. At first, she thought that they were in the process of retracting and then ultimately disappearing. Then, she noticed that the large bruises on Joey's back were in fact rapidly growing in size! If that wasn't shocking enough, Joey's entire body seemed to be undergoing a series of simultaneous changes. As they all watched, his hair grew longer and changed to a chestnut-brown colour. His arms and legs got a little shorter and more slender-looking. His incoherent mumbling began to rise in pitch and intensity and then he started shrieking again in that girl's voice they'd all heard earlier.

"Itami! Tasukete!" he screamed.

Hanako winced and tears started to form in her eyes. Though her father had only recently told her the truth of his mission to the United States, seeing her friend in the throws of such agony was still no easier for her to witness than it was for the Jamesons. Suddenly, Joey arched his back and the large swollen areas that ran from his shoulders to his waist began to split open. _Here it comes_, she thought grimly to herself.

"Oh my God!" Heather screamed. "What the hell is happening to him! Is that ring doing this to him? You have to stop it!" She tried to surge forward again, but this was time held back by both her husband and Mr. Tanaka.

"Please, you must not!" Hanako pleaded with her. "It is the henka! ah, tr..tran-s-for-ming. It can not stop."

Though Hank had finally accepted that whatever was happening to Joey was necessary, he felt nearly sick to his stomach as he watched the boy that he considered a member of his family writhing in pain and he knew that there was nothing he could do to help him. He and the rest of his family watched in horror as something seemed to be pushing out of each of the bleeding wounds on Joey's back. Their horror gradually turned to amazement when it started to become clear exactly what these things were. The pair of wings finally finished extracting themselves and briefly convulsed - effectively splattering the room and its occupants in a shower of blood and other fluids. Almost immediately, the winged figure fell silent and then collapsed motionless onto the bed.

"Oh! my! God!" Hank managed to rasp out in the silence that followed the unbelievable transformation they'd just witnessed.

Mr. Tanaka released his hold on Heather and silently beckoned to her to follow. He then pointed to the wounds on Joey's back, and Heather was amazed to see that they appeared to be healing right before her very eyes. Ignoring the fact that the youngest member of their household now had a large pair of wings on his back, everyone seemed equally relieved when it became evident that he was going to be okay. Heather practically collapsed in her husband's arms and started sobbing into his shoulder.

Mr. Tanaka sighed heavily and turned towards his daughter. He made a hand gesture to her, which she acknowledged with a nod, and then he left the room.

"My father will wait for you downstairs," Hanako explained. "You have many questions... he will answer best he can."

Tom and Lisa took a long, lingering look at the sleeping figure on the bed and then at Lisa's urging they both headed downstairs to talk to Mr. Tanaka. Heather was reluctant to leave Joey's side, but Hanako assured her that she would remain to watch over him until she returned. Slowly, she and her husband turned and followed their children downstairs.

When they'd returned to the living room, they found Mr. Tanaka had thrown the hood of his robe back and was looking at one of the pictures of Joey that was hanging on the wall amongst various family pictures of the Jamesons. Heather recalled that Joey had been a little reluctant at the time to have that photo taken, but eventually she'd managed to talk him into it. She smiled inwardly as she thought of how much she'd enjoyed having the boy live with them these past few years. She and her husband had recently discussed adopting Joey into their family, but now Joey's entire future was a big unknown. What was he? Certainly not human -- Mr. Tanaka's daughter had even said as much. He has wings and a halo? Was he an angel?

Heather shivered inwardly as that very thought began to make her question her beliefs. Their family wasn't traditionally very religious. Other than attending Christmas Eve services at the local church and saying grace at special meals once in awhile, that was about it. Now, the child that she and her husband had come to love as one of their own had just changed into this being and the implications of it frightened her.

Heather shook herself and steeled up her determination. Regardless of what Joey was or even what he looked like, he was still their Joey and she was more concerned about how they could possibly keep him after other people started to learn about him. She hoped that would be one of many questions that Mr. Tanaka might be able to answer for them.

Tom and Lisa looked expectantly at their parents as they'd entered the room, clearly waiting for them to start the conversation. Hank took their cue and cleared his throat to get Mr. Tanaka's attention.

"So amazing!" Mr. Tanaka said as he continued to stare at the photo of Joey for another few moments. Finally, he turned to face them and gestured for them to all sit down.

"Where to begin? Well, I suppose some of the more basic facts are

as good a place as any," Mr. Tanaka said quietly. "Your foster son, Joey, is not human. She was not born into this world, but rather 'fell' into it."

"Soâ€ he is some kind of angel, then?" Heather asked.

Mr. Tanaka paused for thought as he tried to decide how to best explain it to her.

"By western understanding and beliefs, I suppose it's possible to see her that way. In some remote areas of my home country there have been legends of such beings but most consider them to be nothing more than a myth. Her 'race', for lack of a better term, are called Haibane -- which means 'Ash-Feathers', due to the charcoal-grey colour of their wings."

"Why do you keep referring to Joey as 'she'," Lisa asked. "His voice did sound like it had changed for a while there, but you don't mean that he is really aâ€ Her voice trailed off at Mr. Tanaka's subtle nod.

"Yes, she is really a female. The apparent difference of her gender before she'd reverted back to her true form was one of the reasons that we'd been unable to locate her for so long."

"Why now?" Heather asked finally. "Joey seemed fine up until a couple of days ago. What made him suddenlyâ€ changeâ€ like this?"

"Maybe we should try rolling this back a little further, Tanaka-san," Hank spoke up. "Who are you, and who is this 'we' you are referring to? Where exactly did Joey come from?"

--Mr. Tanaka's story:

"I am an adept of an ancient order of mystics from Japan. We call ourselves the Touga. We are a secret society, which is largely unheard of in Japan except in rumors or local legends.

For centuries, perhaps more since no one is really sure when it all began, our order has aided and protected the Haibane. They come into existence in a mystical place known as Glie. It is a fabled township, which is similar to your western legends of Atlantis or Avalon. Like those other mythical places, Glie's location is difficult to define. It is part of this world, yet at the same time separate from it. It is a protected domain that is physically and psychically isolated from this plane. Though the residents of Glie are primarily humans that have lived within its boundaries for many generations, it is for the smaller population of Haibane that is the town's purpose for being. The town is governed by the Haibane Renmei - The Ash-feather Federation. They are usually the elder Haibane that oversee all of the administrative needs of the town.

The Haibane, although similar in appearance to humans, are not human. No one really knows exactly who and what they are - least of all the Haibane themselves. Some believe that they are physically manifested spiritual entities that are somehow caught in-between their previous lives and their next ones. They are not born as humans are. They supposedly 'hatch' in a matured form out of cocoons that seem to appear at random. Their halos are mystic artifacts, which are forged for them and then bound to their spiritual essence. Their wings will

usually grow within a day or two of hatching from their cocoons. They live within the township of Glie pretty much in the same manner as humans do, until they reach their 'Day of Flight'. This is thought to be the day of their spiritual ascension to the next stage of their existence. Some believe that they reincarnate as humans here in the physical world. Others have suggested that they evolve into_Kami_ and then live within the heavens.

For whatever reason or plan that they come into being, each Haibane remains within Glie until they are compelled by instinct to move on. It is widely believed that the Haibane need to achieve some level of personal and spiritual understanding before they can achieve their Day of Flight. Some Haibane remain in Glie for only a few years. For others, their time can be even longer. Their presence in Glie is critical to their spiritual evolution, so it is for this necessity and their protection that Glie is so isolated. Thus, their township is completely surrounded by a physical and spiritual barrier which enforces this isolation. Haibane and humans alike are forbidden to leave Glie, and any that have never return. The only contact with the 'outside world' is through trade with special envoys of mystics that are able to make passage through the barriers. This is the special purpose of the Touga.

The other visitors to Glie are the birds, often crows, which can fly over the Great Walls that protect the township. Though they also possess wings, Haibane do not fly. If a Haibane was somehow able to fly, they could easily bypass the township's barriers that protect them and expose themselves to untold dangers. Fortunately, their wings are typically too small to allow them to achieve flight. Whether this is a deliberate design or simply a coincidence, no one really knows.

Long ago, there had been legends of Haibane that actually develop full-sized wings that allowed them to fly. These rare Haibane were named 'Kazakiribane', which essentially means: 'Flight Feathers'. It had been centuries since the last Kazakiribane had appeared in Glieâ€| until just over 12 years ago. A young Haibane girl named Mori, whose wings and instincts to use them gave her the power of flight. Though capable of flying â€" which, according to the stories, she did quite often -- she heeded the warnings of her elders and never attempted to fly over or even near any of the Great Walls.

The climate of Glie is known to change very quickly. Though they have seasons pretty much the same as in the rest of the outside world, in Glie the changes come swiftly. Such abrupt changes in the climate have, on occasion, brought powerful storms to sweep across the township. About 11 years ago, a storm arrived with such speed and intensity that it caught many of the residents of Glie unprepared. The Kazakiribane was said to have been attempting to rescue someone who had been stranded in a high place when she was caught by the strong winds and carried over the Great Wall. When she did not return, it was believed that she was either injured or lost somehow and it was decided to send a search party for her. Since it is forbidden for anyone from Glie to leave -- even the Haibane Renmei themselves -- the Touga were asked to search for the missing Haibane outside of the Great Wall.

While the Great Wall provides an effective physical barrier, the true barriers of Glie are the mystic boundaries that lie just beyond them. The purpose of the Great Wall is to prevent the residents of Glie

from coming into contact with the mystic boundaries. To that end, the Great Wall is imbued with spiritual wards that are an effective deterrent against humans, but even more so against Haibane. To safely cross the mystic barriers requires intense spiritual discipline and special training of psychic abilities. The Touga train themselves in these disciplines for years in the hopes of being appointed the special honor of becoming an envoy to Glie. Though they found no trace of the missing Haibane girl inside of the mystic barriers, her halo had been discovered just beyond them in the outside world.

When a Haibane achieves their Day of Flight, their halos and feathers are left behind. The halo appears to be dull and spent -- as though all of the mystic energy had left it once it had achieved its purpose. The halo of the Kazakiribane, however, was not found in such a condition. Though it was no longer glowing, it still held a vibrant shine and one could easily sense that its energy was still present but was now dormant. The Haibane Renmei interpreted this as proof that the Kazakiribane had indeed fully entered the outside world and charged the Touga with the sacred trust of finding her and returning her to Glie.

When the envoy of the Touga returned to the outside world, they consulted with the oracles of our order, who determined that the Kazakiribane had survived, but her contact with the mystic barriers of Glie had changed her into a fully human form -- and an infant at that. Uncontrolled crossings of the mystic barrier can randomize one's re-entry point in the outside world, so the Touga had little idea where to begin looking. Finding an unknown, orphaned infant when they had no idea what she even looked like was similar to looking for that proverbial needle in the haystack. Though they searched for years, no trace of the missing Haibane was ever found.

A few years ago, the oracles had another vision about the quest. It was foretold that the missing Kazakiribane would be found in the 'far lands beyond the eastern ocean'. It was then that I was sent with my family to the United States where I would attempt to continue the search for her. Using the extensive resources of our order, I conducted an exhaustive search of various agencies in an attempt to locate our elusive orphan girl, but met with no success. Though discouraged, I vowed to continue with the search until I found her. Over the past few years, my family has moved several times as I followed up various leads -- no matter how small. All of this moving around has been difficult for my family, particularly so for Hanako. I had finally started to consider asking my order to send another searcher to America so that I could return to Japan with my family. It then came as quite a surprise when it was none other than my Hanako who had accidentally found what we were looking for.

Needless to say, I was doubtful at first. Even though the Haibane had been changed into human form, it was a girl that we had been searching for. When both Hanako and my wife began to tell me some of the interesting things about your foster-son, I was very intrigued. There were a number of things that caught their attention, but the most telling event was what had happened when my daughter had brought out the artifact, or 'halo', to show to her new friend. There had been an immediate reaction when your Joey had been exposed to its presence. According to Hanako, he appeared to be in a great deal of discomfort and the halo began to glow brightly. Your foster son became quite unsettled from the experience and fled our house quickly, but just before he left she was able to 'see' something else

-- his true Kazakiribane form. Hanako has inherited her spiritual and psychic sensitivity from my family line, and although mostly untrained, she was able to sense different things about your foster-son. When she'd finally told me of her vision, I was certain that we had, at last, found what we'd been searching for."

--End of Mr. Tanaka's story

There was a long silence as the Jamesons' thought about all of the fantastic, nearly unbelievable things that Mr. Tanaka had told them. A few days ago, or even a few hours ago, they might have dismissed it as outright fantasy. Of course, that was before the youngest member of their household suddenly grew a pair of wings and supposedly changed gender.

Heather Jameson was the first to finally speak.

"What happens now?" she asked, her voice a thready whisper.
"What happens to Joey?"

"For now, there is not much to do but wait," Mr. Tanaka answered.
"The Kazakiribane can not be moved for a few days until she recovers, so it would be better just to let her rest. There is a special envoy of our order en route to us as we speak that should arrive sometime over the next day or so. They will be able to offer more assistance when they do. In the meantime, she'll need to be cared for very carefully."

Mr. Tanaka then went on to explain about how Joey's new wings needed to be thoroughly cleaned of all the blood and other fluids. He asked Heather to find a couple of suitable brushes, then helped her bring a few basins of warm water back up to Joey's room -- pausing briefly to pull his hood back over his head before he entered. He knelt next to the bed and bowed again before passing the bowl and brush he was carrying to his daughter. He made a few more strange hand gestures to Hanako and then he withdrew from the room once again, bowing reverently before he disappeared down the hall.

Heather gazed at the sleeping figure on the bed. Joey was still lying pretty much in the same position as he'd been when they'd all left the room earlier. She leaned a little closer to listen to the slow, steady breathing and seemed to relax a little. He sounded a lot better than he had before.

"My father says that she will be fine now," Hanako spoke up softly.

Heather started a bit at the sound of the girl's voice as she'd momentarily forgotten that anyone else was in the room with her. Again, she noticed the persistent use of female pronouns that the girl and her father were using with Joey. She carefully set the bowl and brush she was carrying down on the bedside table and then slowly sat down on the edge of the bed. She gently picked up one of Joey's hands and immediately noticed how different they felt. His hands were now smaller, and more delicate-looking. Next, she gently ran her fingers through the beautiful, brownish hair that was now long enough to trail down his back to the tops of his wings. Yes, wings. Joey now had wings. She gently touched one of them and recoiled slightly when they suddenly twitched. Yep, they were definitely real, all right.

"Cleaning will be big job," Hanako said with a deep sigh. "We should begin." She then picked up the brush and demonstrated to Heather how to brush the blood and grime out of the feathers.

Heather held her own brush uncertainly in her hand for a moment, then began to copy the girl's brushing motions.

"You seem to know a lot about theseâ€¦ Haibane," Heather said after a few minutes of silent brushing. "Have you and your father seen many others?"

Hanako shook her head.

"No. They are sacred beings to the Touga. Only the honored envoys ever see them. Before I met Joey-kun, I believed they were only from a story. All of this isâ€¦ new to me, too. Father only shared truth with me earlier today."

Heather nodded as she continued with her brushing. Hanako was correct, it would be a big job to completely clean the wings, but she was starting to get the hang of it.

"Hanako, if tradition forbids your father to speak in front ofâ€¦ Joey, why is it that you are allowed to?"

"I have not joined Touga yet. I am too young. I do not have to follow rules like father does," she replied simply.

They were both silent for a few more minutes while they continued to brush the feathers of Joey's wings. Heather kept casting glances over at the small girl and noticed the look of concentration on her face as she focused on her task. Occasionally, her eyes would seem to glaze over a little bit before she snapped herself out of it and returned to her brushing. Obviously, this was almost as fantastic an experience for Hanako as it was for the rest of them, Heather thought to herself.

Downstairs, Tom and his father had seated themselves on the living room sofa and each wore a similar dazed expression on their faces. The events of the past few hours had left them temporarily speechless as they tried to make sense out of the situation. An ancient order of mystics, as well as a mythical city and angel-like beings. Clearly, the world they knew had suddenly become a lot more interesting. A small smirk briefly formed on Hank's face as he thought of the old Chinese curse about living in 'interesting times'. Lisa, on the other hand, seemed even more enthusiastic about recent events than before, if that was at all possible.

"Umâ€¦ Mr. Tanaka?" Lisa asked with a look of keen interest in her eyes. "What was all that with the ringâ€¦ er, I mean, halo?"

Mr. Tanaka looked thoughtful as he considered the best way to explain it to them.

"Our oracles had long ago theorized that the Kazakiribane's transformation into a fully human body was the result of a few unique factors. Although no one can really know for sure what caused it, we suspect that two of the most significant factors were her uncontrolled encounter with the barriers of Glie and the simultaneous

loss of her halo. The halo is part of the spiritual matrix of a Haibane. Without it, their forms are... unstable. When my Hanako had exposed your foster brother to the halo, his brief contact with it disrupted the temporary stasis of his human form. He then began to revert back to his true Haibane form."

Mr. Tanaka gave a heavy sigh before continuing.

"The trauma of the wing growth is said to be particularly difficult for a Haibane to bear, but even more so for a Kazakiribane due to their unusually large wings. Unfortunately for your foster-son, his brief exposure to the mystic energy of the halo was enough to trigger the changes, but not enough to properly stabilize them. Eventually, the stress would have become more than his human body could withstand, and it would have probably killed him."

The room was silent as the import of Mr. Tanaka's words sunk in. Hank slumped forward in his seat and buried his face in his hands. Though he wasn't a particularly religious man, he offered a silent prayer of thanks to whatever Gods had been watching over his foster son. It had been a very near thing, indeed.

"When she was properly re-joined to her halo," Mr. Tanaka continued, "its mystic energy provided the required balance to her spiritual matrix and restored the healing properties necessary to survive the growth of her wings, along with some of her other changes. This was the purpose for which the halo had been given to my keeping while my family came overseas to search for her. It had been foretold by our oracles that the halo and the one it was bonded to would eventually be drawn to each other."

Lisa nodded in understanding, although she wasn't entirely certain if she really did understand everything. Although she'd always been particularly enthusiastic about her interests in the paranormal, she had never really considered how much of it she truly believed. Her foster brother... or perhaps she should be thinking of him as her foster sister now, was living proof of wonders beyond the normal scope of most peoples' understanding.

"So... um, what kind of things can a... uh, Caza-Kirie-ban-ey do?" Lisa finally asked.

Mr. Tanaka blinked.

"I'm sorry? I'm not sure that I understand your question," he answered.

"Well... I was wondering if they have any kind of special powers or anything. What else is different about them?"

Her brother groaned and shook his head slightly in embarrassment.

"C'mon Sis," Tom said with a bit of weariness in his voice. "He.. uh, I mean.. _she_ just grew a pair of wings!"

He paused for a moment to quickly look down at his shirt. He hadn't bothered to change his clothes yet and grimaced at the now-dried specks of blood that stained the front of it. He felt a bit of bile rise in his throat as the image of those large wings erupting from

Joey's back replayed itself in his mind's eye, as well as his screams of pain that still echoed in his ears. It was a gore scene that any Hollywood special effects artists would have been proud of. It had been bad enough just to witness it, but he couldn't even begin to imagine what it must have been like for Joey to experience it.

"I'm still trying to get over the fact that Joey just turned into a 'she' and isn't even human anymore. We've already got enough to deal with right now without you trying to dig up more. Give it a rest, will ya?" He said as he shot her an irritated glare.

Lisa scowled at her brother and briefly considered flipping him her middle finger, but thought better of it with her father present. Instead she simply folded her arms and 'hmpheh!' indignantly.

"Well, to answer your question," Mr. Tanaka said to Lisa, "the truth is that we're not really sure. Within the boundaries of Glie, Haibane are not all that different from any of the humans that they share the town with. The outside world, however, is an entirely different matter. Haibane are not meant to exist here, so it's difficult to predict what can happen. As for the Kazakiribane, she is pretty much the same as any other Haibane except for the fact that she actually does fly. It would be reasonable to assume that she would have that ability here in the outside world just as she had in Glie."

"I suspect that would be a little difficult to explain to our neighbors," Hank spoke up with a small chuckle. "In fact, I'm surprised that Joey's screaming earlier didn't prompt any of them to call the police."

"Of course, you understand that it is very important to keep the Kazakiribane hidden." Mr. Tanaka said with some apprehension. "It would be far too disruptive to the world if she were to be discovered. It is vital for her to return to Glie, for she is a Haibane and does not belong in the outside world."

Upstairs in the bedroom, the exhausted figure continued to sleep. Thanks to the newly-restored balance of her physical and spiritual essence, her body was rapidly recovering from its earlier ordeal. While Heather and Hanako continued with their monumental task of cleaning her large wings, she descended further into a deep and restful sleep. Dreams that had felt disjointed and difficult to remember in the past now came much more easily, and memories from a lifetime ago began to return with greater clarity.

* * *

>AN: More to come in the next chapter: "Two Lives Merged"

8. Two Lives Merged

Disclaimer:_"Haibane Renmei"_ and its associated characters & places used within this story are based upon Yoshitoshi ABe's original concept: _"Charcoal Feathers in Old Home"_. They remain the undisputed property of the owners that hold copyright. I am writing this story for free enjoyment and not for profit, but even so I maintain creative ownership of my own story concepts. None of this story is to be copied or reproduced etc. without my knowledge or

permission.

This fanfiction is a story concept that I'd had in my head for quite awhile now. There's quite a lot of it that I'm still tweaking here and there for continuity issues before the story can be completely finished, but I'll post it in segments as I finish editing them. Read on... and feel free to leave a review if you are so inclined.

In some parts of the story, I have tried to use *italics* to help indicate whenever any characters are supposed to be conversing in Japanese. After all, this is supposed to be a story not a language lesson, so I hope that you aren't disappointed if I stick with English for the most part. ;~)

* * *

>Kazakiribane éç"å^†ã,Šç¾½ â€" **Chapter Eight: Two Lives Merged**

By Shizukana Sakka

Rakka smiled contentedly as she and Mori headed to their respective jobs at the Haibane Renmei Temple. In the beginning, she'd been a bit overwhelmed and intimidated by the atmosphere of the Temple, but gradually she was able to overcome it and became more comfortable with her job. The only continual downside to it was that it was such a long distance to travel on foot from Old Home to the Temple. Fortunately, over the past few months, even that had ceased to become much of an issue thanks to Mori. She glanced down at the landscape passing beneath her as she and Mori flew their usual morning route to the Temple and couldn't quite suppress a joyful giggle. Despite the numerous times she'd been flying with Mori over the past few months, each time was as thrilling as the last had been.

"Enjoying the ride, Rakka?" Mori asked with a knowing smirk on her face.

"I certainly am," she replied. "I could never get tired of this. Thank you so much for giving me rides to work so often!"

"Don't mention it. I love flying so much... I'm happy to be able to share that feeling with others," Mori answered with a happy smile. "Unfortunately, I won't be available to give you a ride home after work today, though. The Communicator will be sending me on some errands to the town and to Abandoned Factory that will take most of the day."

"That's okay. Of all the Haibane, I probably get to fly with you the most so it won't bother me to walk home for a change."

Down below, they sighted the familiar small river canyon that led to the Temple and began their descent. Mori glided them effortlessly through the air to just outside of the main Temple entrance and then brought them to an easy landing with a few powerful flaps of her wings. Rakka immediately began to unhook herself from the travel harness and handed it back to Mori. Kana and Hikari had come up with the idea a while ago to put less strain on Mori when she took other Haibane for a flight. Though her wings were plenty strong enough to bear the weight of an additional person in flight, it was tiring for Mori to have to hold onto them with her arms for extended periods. To

solve this problem, Kana and Hikari had designed a special pair of harnesses that are worn separately but can be quickly fastened securely together in order to support the weight of whomever Mori wanted to carry with her. When not being used, they folded up into a convenient traveling bag that Mori carried with her nearly all the time. Rakka smiled as she remembered how thrilled Mori had been when they'd first given it to her.

After that, Mori had eagerly provided air taxi service to any Haibane that asked her -- including those at Abandoned Factory. In an effort to improve relations between the two Haibane conclaves, Rakka had initially made several visits with Mori but soon afterwards Midori began to reciprocate. Rakka and Midori quickly became good friends, and for a time Midori became a regular visitor to Old Home. Unfortunately, more recently, those visits had stopped and Rakka missed seeing her friend.

"Mori, if you're going to be at Abandoned Factory later, why don't you invite Midori back to Old Home for dinner tonight?" Rakka asked as Mori stowed both flight harnesses into her travel bag. "We haven't seen her for awhile and a break from her duties will be good for her."

Mori nodded her head in agreement.

"That's for sure. Ever since she became the group leader at Abandoned Factory, it seems like she doesn't have much time to visit us anymore."

Midori had become the defacto leader of Abandoned Factory a month earlier after her friend Ryouko had his Day of Flight. Though all Haibane accept that this day will eventually come for each of them, those that remain behind feel the absence of those friends that depart before them. Midori and Ryouko had been very close, so she had been having a difficult time coping with her sense of loss. She immediately threw herself into her new duties at Abandoned Factory and it seemed that she was trying to distract herself from her emotional pain by keeping herself insanely busy. Rakka wasn't fooled by Midori's claims that she had gotten over it and was determined to help her friend.

"Well, be sure to let her know that we aren't taking 'no' for an answer this time" said Rakka. "I'm sure that Abandoned Factory can survive without her for one night. Be sure to bring her back with you, even if you have to tie her up to do it!"

Mori giggled slightly. "I don't know how friendly she'll be towards us for the evening if I did that, but I doubt it'll be necessary. I'm sure I'll be able to persuade her."

With that, Mori gave Rakka a quick hug and then flew up to her entrance through the open ceiling of the Temple, while Rakka approached the main gate where an attendant was waiting to outfit her with communication bells.

As promised, the Communicator had a series of errands for Mori that she would have to start on immediately if she hoped to get everything finished before the end of the day. She was still supposed to avoid flying in or within view of the town unless absolutely necessary, so instead she usually flew to just outside of the small city and landed

somewhere unobserved to continue the rest of her journey on foot.

As she proceeded into the town proper, she sighed deeply when the usual staring and whispered comments began to go on around her. Though the residents always seemed to take some interest whenever Haibane entered the town, it was another matter altogether when Mori visited. Her large wings had always attracted a lot of attention, but sometimes the attention wasn't all that friendly. There were a number of particularly superstitious people in Glie that saw the presence of a Kazakiribane as a bad omen. These people were always easy to spot, as they usually either shied away from her or quickly retreated into the nearest building where they'd glare at her from doorways and windows until she'd passed by. Fortunately those kinds of people seemed to be in the minority amongst the population of Glie, but just the same they always made Mori feel nervous about visiting the town " particularly whenever she had to make the trip alone. For such town visits, she typically kept her wings folded in as close to her back as possible and then covered them with a shawl that she wore, but even then they were still difficult to conceal. It annoyed her that she had to go to those sorts of lengths in an attempt to appease those small-minded people, so as a general rule she disliked coming into town at all and only did so when she had to.

Her first task had been to deliver some papers from the Haibane Renmei to the town's main administration building and then later a few more to the headquarters of the Town Watch " which was what essentially passed for law enforcement within Glie. Generally speaking, crime and civil disobedience was relatively rare in their township so the Watch personnel were seldom seen away from their primary task of guarding the Great Wall. Of course, most of the Watch personnel regarded her with a certain amount of unease as they were well aware of what the implications of her large wings meant.

After she'd left the Watch HQ, she had some time to spare until she had to pickup the remaining paperwork from the town's administration. Afterwards, she'd be finished with her tasks in town for the day and would return to the temple, but unfortunately she had to find something to do with herself until then. As she walked through the streets of Glie, she began to gather something of an entourage. Unlike some of the adults, the children of Glie were absolutely thrilled to see the large-winged Haibane " even more so than the Young Feathers back at Old Home. With the exception of certain superstitious individuals, most of the townsfolk practically treated her as a celebrity. While she didn't particularly care for all of the attention, this had become something of an unofficial duty for her. The Haibane Renmei were well aware of some of the negative views that some of the townsfolk had about Mori, so they encouraged her to 'mingle' amongst the townsfolk whenever she visited in an attempt to reinforce the fact that, despite her large wings, she was just as much a Haibane as any of the others. With that in mind, she decided to take a break for awhile and sat down on a bench. Of course, she had to loosen her shawl a little so she could allow her wings to hang comfortably down the back of the bench, but it wasn't as if the shawl was doing all that much to conceal them anyways.

Almost immediately, some of the children had broken away from their parents and ran up to her with excited expressions on their faces.

"You're the Haibane that can fly, right?" Asked one little boy. "Why

are you walking, then? Why don't you fly?"

"Yeah! I wanna see you fly!" Another little boy chimed in.

She got that question a lot, particularly from the children and teenagers. Though practically none of the townsfolk had actually seen her fly, pretty much everyone assumed that she could. The topic was something of a taboo " particularly within the town itself " so she typically downplayed her answer or tried to change the topic altogether whenever it came up.

"Everyone else walks in town, so shouldn't I as well?" She answered while gently tousling the boy's hair.

"But wouldn't flying be a lot more fun?" Asked an older girl who looked to be in her early teens. "If I could fly, I'd do it all the time!"

She sighed inwardly and regretted that she didn't have any of the other Haibane with her who usually helped to deflect such questions away from her. These solo-visits to town could really be a pain in the ass sometimes. For lack of anything to distract the older girl from her line of questioning, she decided to try a more direct approach.

"Flying can be a big responsibility," She answered carefully. "Not only that, but maybe it could even frighten other people if they saw someone flying. You wouldn't want to scare anyone, would you?"

The girl looked a bit puzzled by Mori's reply. While she was thinking about it, another girl quickly spoke up.

"But you DO fly. I saw you once when I was having a picnic with some friends out near those old buildings that many of you Haibane live at. Another time, my cousin saw you flying in the direction of the Haibane temple. Why don't you ever fly around here?"

"Well" "Mori answered carefully, "All Haibane have rules that we live by, and for me, that's only one of them."

As the girl was about to ask another question, she was interrupted by a tall boy who looked like he was in his late teens. He pushed his way past several of the younger children that had gathered around Mori and stopped in front of her. He regarded her briefly with a scowl on his face before directing his attention towards everyone else.

"You should all know better than to hang around this freak," he said, pronouncing the last word as unpleasantly as he could. "It's bad enough that the town elders tolerate its visits here, but that doesn't mean we have to let it near us to infect us with its corruption!"

Mori started to become really nervous. While she'd understood on some level that there were some people in the town whose prejudices ran this deep, she hadn't imagined that she'd ever be directly confronted by one. She slowly began to rise to her feet so she could quietly leave the area, but the bad-mannered youth turned on her and abruptly shoved her back down onto the bench.

"Not so fast, freak. We're not finished with you yet â€" not by a long shot!"

"Knock it off, Steven!" said the girl he'd interrupted earlier. She gave him a moderate shove of her own and forced him away from the frightened Haibane. "Who's this 'we' you're talking about? You're the only one here that seems to have a problem with the flying Haibane. She doesn't bother us, so why don't YOU get lost?"

There were a lot of murmurs and nods from everyone else, which further backed up the girl's point. All of the rest of the teenagers and younger children clustered together and deliberately positioned themselves between Mori and Steven.

"Why don't you go away, you big bully! Stop being so mean to the nice winged-girl!" said one little girl.

"Yeah," said another teenage girl, "everyone knows that you're only picking on the Haibane to try to impress your dad. Are you hoping to be as big a prick as him someday?"

Steven glared back at her and looked as though he wanted to use his larger physical size to intimidate her but, after a quick glance around, he realized that it wouldn't be a smart move since he was considerably out-numbered at the moment.

"Fine," he snorted angrily. "You don't know what you're messing around with. That thingâ€" he said, pointing abruptly at Mori, "... puts us all at risk as long as it remains here. It's probably already been beyond the wall and is infested with whatever diseases are found there!"

With that, the surly teen cast a final contemptuous glare at Mori, then turned on his heel and left. Several of the crowd grumbled disapprovingly at him as he departed.

"Don't let him get to you," said the same teen girl who'd just stood up for her. "He and a few others in this town are too superstitious and narrow-minded, but they don't speak for everyone and they know it. Steven was probably just mouthing off to try to score points with his dad. To most of us that live in this town, a flying Haibane is really cool."

Mori took some consolation in the girl's words, but she was still severely rattled by the animosity of that one boy. Even if most of the town didn't think like him, there were still a few who did and, in Mori's opinion, even one was far too many. The rest of the people around her seemed friendly enough, but after that unpleasant encounter she was eager to be back amongst her own kind. She glanced down the street towards the clock tower and noted with some disappointment that it still wasn't quite time for her to finish her errands in town. She gazed up at the skies and sighed wistfully as she longed to just unfold her wings and escape the town as fast as possible.

She decided to pay a visit to the used clothing store that all the Haibane shopped at. The proprietor of that store was always friendly and supportive of the Haibane, but even better was that he typically discouraged other patrons from pestering any of them while they were shopping in his store. Though she didn't really feel any need to buy

anything, she figured browsing the store would at least grant her a little peace & quiet before it was time to head back towards the administration building.

Most of the people that had formed her entourage dispersed when she'd entered the store. Some loitered around outside for a few minutes before deciding to leave as well, and though a few had followed her inside, they too finally left her alone. After a while of mild browsing and listening to that strange radio of the shopkeeper's, Mori decided it was finally time to leave. She adjusted her cloak to try covering her wings as much as possible. Though her highly-visible halo would always identify her as a Haibane, she was always hopeful that it wouldn't be immediately obvious to the humans that she was the large-winged Haibane. She was more than ready to finish her business in town for the day, and she didn't want to attract any more hassles than she'd had already. Fortunately, no one else seemed to pay her any more attention than they would any other Haibane during her walk back to the administration building.

After picking up the last the completed documents, Mori chose the shortest distance available to reach the town's outer limits. It didn't matter to her in which direction that was since she was planning to fly again as soon as she got out of sight of the town. Then, after returning to the temple to drop off the papers, she would next visit the Haibane conclave at Abandoned Factory to deliver a few things on behalf of the Haibane Renmei. She had heard that they had discovered a new cocoon over there, so she'd probably be delivering the halo mold to be on hand for when the new Haibane hatched. The idea of the arrival of a new Haibane brought a smile to her face. Though it had been only a year or so since her own arrival, she was still the most recent Haibane to be born in Glie, which technically made her the 'youngest'. Even all of the Young Feathers had been in Glie longer than her. Not that she minded being considered the youngest, but she was happy for her turn to finally be a big sister to someone else.

Mori was so lost in her thoughts about the new Haibane that she'd failed to notice she was being followed at a discreet distance as she made her way to the outskirts of town. After she'd reached what she felt was a suitable distance from the town, she removed her cloak and gladly shook her wings out. Just as she was getting ready to take to the air, her unwanted company chose that moment to show themselves. Mori was caught off guard when a lasso suddenly landed around her shoulders and was quickly pulled tight.

"Not so fast, you flying freak!" said a voice with a familiar menacing tone to it. Mori whipped her head around to face her assailant and noted with dismay that the nasty guy from earlier that day was holding onto the other end of the rope. Not only did he have a really nasty and smug grin on his face, but this time he'd also brought a couple of friends with him that looked just as unfriendly as he did.

"The other folks in town don't understand what you are, but there are a few of us that do," he said as he nodded towards each of his companions. "Freaks like you shouldn't be allowed near decent folk. After we're done with you, maybe next time you'll think twice before trying to come back again!"

With that, he gave the rope a particularly hard yank which pulled

Mori off her feet. Before she could rise to her feet again, her three assailants set upon her and began to rain blows down on her. Though the rope encircled her shoulders tightly, only the tops of her wings had been pinned so she was able to use her powerful wing muscles to pry the rope off. Before she could lift it over her head, however, Steve quickly pulled the slack out and the rope tightened around her neck. Mori choked and started to see white spots in the corners of her vision while she desperately tried to work her fingers under the rope to pry it loose.

The sight of the young winged girl on her knees gasping for breath suddenly gave the other two assailants pause for thought. They each developed uneasy expressions on their faces and they stopped landing blows on her. When their friend Steve continued to kick at her, they got in front of him and gently but firmly tried to force him back from the struggling Haibane.

"Steve, manâ€¦ that's enough," said one.

"Yeah dude," said the other, "She's gotten the message. Lay off already before you kill her."

"So what if I do?!" Steve retorted angrily. "I'll be doing the whole town a favor, so get the hell out of my way!"

While Steve and his two friends were distracted by their argument, it gave Mori the opportunity she needed to loosen the rope that had been strangling her. There wasn't enough slack in it for her to get it over her head, so she knew she'd have to get the other end away from Steve before she could free herself completely. Acting quickly, she unfolded her wings and used them to swat the trio of boys aside. It wasn't enough to hurt any of them, but it surprised them enough to make Steve drop his end of the rope he'd been holding. Before any of them could get back on their feet, she removed the rope and threw it aside. Without so much as a backwards glance, she leaped into the air and flew away as fast as her sore wings could carry her. Though she'd been instructed not to fly in front of humans, she hoped that the Haibane Renmei would understand under the circumstances.

As she flew back to the temple, the damage from the beating began to take its toll and it was becoming increasingly difficult for Mori remain in flight. By the time she'd begun to descend into the familiar small canyon, her wing muscles were cramping up and she was barely able to glide. She sighted the temple ahead and knew that there would be no entering through the open ceiling this time. Landing was going to be extremely difficult without being able to flap her wings properly to slow her descent. She came in fast and low over the heads of some undoubtedly surprised Haibane Renmei members that were tending to the gardens in front of the temple's main entrance. Her nearly immobile wing muscles screamed in pain when she tried to invert herself for her usual feet-first landing, instead causing her to tumble head over heels into a corner of the garden. With a heavy thud, she finally came to a stop within a large cluster of tomato plants.

"I hope the Communicator isn't too angry about the garden being wrecked. The tomatoes were his favoriteâ€¦" she thought to herself before finally passing out.

Joey hadn't awakened once in the 2 days since his transformation, but Heather was determined to remain by his " or her " bedside until she did. All things considered, though, there weren't any other extraordinary changes in the winged figure other than the rapid healing of her back where her wings had come forth. Her grand wings were revealed to be a beautiful charcoal-grey colour after they'd finally finished cleaning them. They were no longer prone to random spasms and were folded into a relaxed position against the sleeping figure's back. Though she was still having difficulty thinking of her foster son as a female now -- let alone the mythical creature that she evidently was -- there was no denying the modest bust line or the soft, feminine curves of the figure before her. As such, with the men of the household frequently dropping by the room, she felt it was best to have her foster child more properly attired to preserve her modesty. With the Tanaka girl's help, after they'd given her a sponge bath, they had dressed her in one of Heather's old low-back nightgowns and then left her to sleep, though someone " usually Heather " was constantly in the room to watch over her.

It was around early-afternoon of the 3rd day. Heather had dozed off into a light sleep as she kept her usual vigil in the chair next to her foster-child's bed. She found herself suddenly awakened when she thought she'd heard a soft noise in the room with her. Upon opening her eyes, she immediately noticed that the winged figure in the bed was starting to stir. Heather quickly moved to the doorway of the bedroom to call for Hanako and Lisa.

"I think he's" um, she's finally waking up," she called down the hallway. She then resumed her seat and anxiously waited for whatever would happen next.

"Omigod!! She's finally waking up? Wait a sec... I'm going to grab my camera," Lisa said excitedly from the doorway. She then quickly dashed off down the hallway to her room, practically knocking Hanako over as she charged past her.

"I do not think it is good idea to take pictures," Hanako remarked as she entered the room. "If anyone else saw, there could be" problems."

Heather nodded her head in understanding but said nothing. She resolved to confiscate any pictures that Lisa took, but she'd probably keep them for herself instead of destroying them. Since it was likely that Joey would soon be leaving them forever, she knew that she would want to have at least something to remember him/her by.

Lisa returned with her camera, and then the 3 visitors waited for the winged figure to fully awaken.

After a few minutes, Joey's stirring became more frequent. Her eyes had flickered open briefly but quickly shut again in protest against the light streaming in through the window. No one made a sound as they watched the angelic figure slowly pull herself up into a kneeling position and then proceeded to stretch her arms comfortably in the air above her head. Finally, she opened her eyes fully and gazed around the room. She was suddenly startled as her bright green eyes discovered that she wasn't alone in the room and nearly fell back against the headboard of the bed in surprise.

"O... Ohayou!" she said nervously in a soft feminine voice. "Naze sono youni watashi o gyoushishiteiruka?"

Heather and Lisa's jaws dropped open in surprise and slowly turned to look at Hanako.

"She say, 'Good Morning.. Why are you staring at me in that way?'" Hanako translated for them.

"_Good afternoon, Joey-san. Don't be alarmed, they are just curious and worried about you,"_ Hanako said back to Joey in Japanese.

"Holy shit!" Lisa said to her mother. "Does this mean he.. uh, I mean she, doesn't know how to speak English anymore?"

Heather could only shrug her shoulders and shake her head. She didn't know what to make of this change in Joey either.

Upon hearing Lisa's words, Joey gave her head a quick shake and frowned slightly as she appeared to concentrate for a moment.

"S..sorry. I didn't realize that I was speakingâ€¦ Ummâ€¦ H..Hello Lisa!" Joey said nervously. "Errr.. how are you today?"

"I think we're all more interested in how YOU are feeling there, Joeyâ€¦ or maybe we should be calling you Josephine now." Lisa replied with a bit of a giggle.

Suddenly remembering that she had her camera with her, Lisa took a quick shot of her foster brother/sister's bewildered expression. Remembering Hanako's earlier words, Heather reached over and took the camera from Lisa's hands. Lisa protested, but a stern glare from her mother quickly silenced her. She then turned her gaze back to Joey, who had just noticed not only what she was wearing, but also the different body underneath. She then glanced over her shoulder at the tops of her wings and then reached up and felt her halo suspended above her head.

"So.. it's not a dream this time, is it? It's all real." She muttered softly to herself.

Though she knew that the question wasn't really directed at anyone in particular, Heather answered, "Yes dear, it would appear so."

Heather shifted from her chair to sit on the edge of the bed closer to Joey. "So.. how are you feeling then? Are you in any discomfort? Do you know where you are? Do you know who you are orâ€¦ what you are?" She asked softly, the last question with a slight tone of uneasiness.

Joey closed her eyes for a long moment. When she opened them again, she replied "Mori desu. Ano, mo Jo-i desu." Hanako opened her mouth to translate again, but before she could speak a word, Joey repeated it in English. "I am Mori, but I am also Joey"

At that, her halo flared brighter and she closed her eyes. She sat completely motionless for nearly an entire minute with her brow

furrowed in concentration. When she reopened her eyes, she glanced over at Hanako.

"_Hanako-chan,"_ she said, switching back to Japanese. _"Your family knows what I am and where I come from. Do you also know how I might get back or even if I can go back?"_

Hanako glanced at both Lisa and Heather in turn, and gave them a look that indicated she would explain things to them later.

"_Yes, Joey-san. My father belongs to the order sworn to help and protect your kind. He and the special envoys should be back to visit later today and perhaps they'll know the answer."_

"_Special envoys?"_

"_Yes. Father sent for them a few days ago after he'd discovered the truth about you. Your race is sacred to the order and being in your presence is an honor that is, by tradition, reserved for only the most spiritually disciplined of the Touga."_

At the mention of the Touga, Joey/Mori looked surprised for a moment but then nodded her head in understanding. In Glie, all anyone really knew of the Touga was that they came from somewhere beyond the Great Wall. If the Touga existed here and were able to travel to Glie somehow, then maybe there was a way for her to return.

Her halo glowed brightly as she continued to sift through her memories of her life in Glie. She quickly came to the realization that she'd been gone from Glie for more than 10 years now. If she was to return, would any of the people she knew still be there? Rakka had once told her of a Haibane who'd achieved her Day of Flight after only a couple of years, and of another who'd remained in Glie for nearly 10 years before her Day finally came. What of her own Day of Flight? Was it still awaiting her back in Glie, or would she achieve it here in the outside world? Another thought worried her: Though it had been an accident, she had crossed beyond the Great Wall. Was she still capable of reaching her Day of Flight now, or would she be bound forever to an existence in Glie if she was still able to return—or here in the outside world if she couldn't? The Communicator would probably know the answer, but she had no way of knowing if she'd ever get the chance to ask him.

The use of Japanese followed by the long silence while Mori/Joey considered her thoughts was wearing on Lisa's patience. Her mother also seemed to be lost in her own thoughts while she gazed at the winged girl seated in front of her.

"Ok," Lisa finally said to break the silence. "You've been out of it for several days after those things," she said with a nod towards the girl's back, "exploded out of you. You've also changed into a girl, and you've got a halo. Though I usually get a kick out of testing the limits of my weird-shit-o-meter, I could go with at least trying for something close to normal for awhile. How 'bout we all try going downstairs and put a late lunch together? You haven't eaten in days, Josephine—and I'll bet that even a Caza-kirey—whatever you are, gets hungry."

She frowned a bit at being called 'Josephine' but let it slide for the moment as Lisa's suggestion about lunch had merit. Now that she

realized it, she really was quite hungry. Heather stood up and gently held Mori/Joey's hand as she helped her rise to her feet. She swayed for only a moment or two, but quickly gained her balance. With no one behind her, she slightly unfolded her wings and gave them a slight shake before settling them back into their relaxed position again. She really wanted to stretch them out fully, but there wasn't enough space in the room " or possibly anywhere inside the house " to properly do that.

Lisa and Hanako led the way, and Mori/Joey followed them with Heather taking up the rear. Heather sucked in her breath as she watched the angelic figure walking in front of her. Joey had transformed into such an ethereal beauty that it was now practically mesmerizing to look at her. She also seemed to move with a fluid grace and poise that looked as though it was the product of years of finishing school. Dressed in the slightly oversized long nightgown, she practically floated as they made their way down to the kitchen & dining room. This amazing being was definitely all-female, of that there could be no doubt. However, as the girl herself had said earlier, she was also Joey, too. Regardless of the strange new form that he/she was now wearing, Heather could still feel her love for her foster child and it made her heart ache to know that she would soon have to let her go. As sad as the thought was, she vowed she'd treasure her remaining time with Mori/Joey as much as she could.

* * *

>AN: I apologize for the ridiculously long hiatus I'd taken from working on this story. There is a lot that I'd wanted to accomplish with it, so I'm going to try to dedicate the proper amount of time that this story deserves in order to complete it. A special thank-you to everyone who has waited so patiently for me to finally get writing again! <div>

End
file.